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No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt

Bonnie Ruberg

ABSTRACT

Game designers and scholars alike commonly claim that video games should be first and foremost fun. At the same time, in reactionary corners of gamer culture, the argument that games should be "just for fun" is shutting down discourse around diversity. However, there is much more to video games than fun. It can be argued that video games are the twenty-first century's most influential art form, and they can and do engender a wide range of feelings, from joy to sadness, annoyance to rage. Although some researchers, such as ludologist Jesper Juul, have acknowledged the prevalence of unpleasant moments in video-game play, they often make sense of these difficult experiences by reframing them as stepping stones on the road to happiness. In this article, I argue for a different approach to affect in video games, one that focuses on experiences that are "no fun." Drawing from writing by queer theorist Jack Halberstam, I demonstrate how no-fun emotions disrupt accepted paradigms of video games and heteronormative pleasures more broadly. I conclude with a series of examples of no-fun games that illustrate how affect can communicate meaning as effectively and diversely as a game's content, and how looking at games that go beyond fun creates new space for players, games, and queer worlds at the margins.

I am playing *Super Hexagon*, I am losing badly, and I love it. The 2012 "punishment game" developed by Terry Cavanagh is designed to make me fail, and designed to hurt. A catchy techno beat drives me forward as I attempt to steer an arrow through an oncoming maze of concentric geometric shapes. The spinning neon puzzle pulses. After only nine seconds of game-

play, I crash into a wall. "Game over," intones a pitiless announcer, followed quickly by the imperative: "Again." And I do play again, and I die again. Seven seconds, ten seconds, six seconds. Game over, game over, game over. For a player like me, this is not training. I'm not improving. Honestly, I'm just not very good. So why do I keep playing such a difficult game when I know I will never win? Because I don't want to win. I want to fail. I want to feel frustration, annoyance, disappointment, domination, and pain. I want a play experience that is, queerly enough, no fun.

I am playing *Mario Kart 8* (Nintendo, 2014), I have chosen to lose, and I love it. Three friends and I are running amok in the newest installation of this longstanding Nintendo racing series. We rev and skid our way through "battle" mode, hurling shells at one another on a sunny, sandy, Egyptian-inspired course. When the match begins, my opponents scatter and begin launching their attacks. As for me, I'm blissfully distracted by the transgressive glee of a play mode that allows me to breach the normal boundaries of the course, and I roam the level's landscape at will. Rather than hunt down my fellow players, I stop to marvel at a sucking, swirling pit of quick sand: a particularly frightening race-course obstacle designed to be avoided at all costs. Joyfully contrarian, I drive my cart into the abyss. Each time my driver respawns, I do it again. A kind of ecstasy takes over—the ecstasy of self-destruction—and I repeat my feat of defiance until all my lives are lost.

I am playing *Stair Dismount*, all I can do is lose, and I love it. In this ragdoll physics simulator (Jetro Lauha, 2009), my goal is to fling a floppy dummy down a flight of stairs or stair-like courses. Thanks to Facebook integration with the mobile release of the game, I have had the opportunity to plaster my own photo to the dummy's otherwise featureless face. He has become my avatar: a compliant, expectant, infinitely fragile little version of myself. As a player, the only choice I can make is in what direction and how hard I push him. Once sent tumbling, his limbs flail, head over heels, cracking and crunching as he smacks against the stairs. An ever-mounting tally of damage flashes on the side of my screen: broken bones, twisted ligaments, crushed vertebrae. The more hurt I cause to this avatar who bears my face, the more points I earn. If this is fun, it is a painful fun, masochistic fun, fun that takes its pleasure in all the wrong places, fun that brings into question what "fun" even means.

Commonly, game players, game designers, and game scholars make the assumption that, first and foremost, games are supposed to be fun—and that the "right" way to play, the normal way to play, is to maximize normative enjoyment. Likewise, self-proclaimed defenders of the video-game medium insist that games are supposed to be "just for fun." And although some designers and scholars have

acknowledged the intriguing prevalence of unpleasant moments in even main-stream video games, they too readily explain away these bad feelings by reframing them as stepping stones on the road to success. In this article, I will be arguing for a different approach to understanding affect in video games, an approach that destabilizes the monolith of fun and instead explores and embraces play experiences that are "no fun." Like any art form, video games can and do engender a wide range of feelings. The traditional and often myopic focus on fun forecloses a rich array of emotions—among them anger, annoyance, fear, alarm, and hurt—that can in fact shape a game's message as much as (if not more than) its content and mechanics. By contrast, looking at games that go beyond fun creates new spaces for players, games, and queer worlds at the margins.

I will begin by mapping current discussions around video games and fun to demonstrate the need for a wider consideration of seemingly negative emotions in play. Drawing from recent queer theory, I will propose a new mode of interpreting these emotions, reframing them as embodied and potentially subversive experiences that draw our attention to players at the margins. Scholars like Colleen Macklin and Avery Mcdaldno have challenged the game design community to think about queerness as a game mechanic.[1] In a similar vein, I want to challenge game scholars to think about queer gaming as an affect—a way of feeling otherly or "badly" during play. A refusal to have fun represents, I believe, a rejection of the heteronormative status quo that takes place on the level of the body. In this way, no-fun games form a system of disruptive counter-affects that can productively bring into question the traditional goals of video games, those who play them, and pleasure more broadly. Using a variety of examples, I outline below a rudimentary taxonomy of these no-fun games, ranging from the unintentionally irritating to the deliberately heart-wrenching. The difficult moments that such games bring to life should not be dismissed as trivial or incidental. Wherever there is fun, there is also no-fun. Oversimplified, fun masks the true affective full complexity of play: its messiness, its painfulness, its kinkiness, its queerness.

⟩⟩⟩ Fun or "No Fun?"

Fun has long been a guiding principle for game designers. Game design text-books like Raph Koster's *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, Brenda Romero and Ian Schrieber's *Challenges for Game Designers*, and Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen's *Rules of Play*, to name a few widely read examples, emphasize fun as a key marker of a well-designed game. Even designers who create serious games—

games that strive to communicate educational messages—seem to agree that the experiences their games facilitate for players must still be "fun first."[2] Fun is also a guiding consumer principle. Commercially successful video games come in all shapes and sizes from across diverse markets. What they have in common is that they give players the thing they've come to expect: a good time. The majority of game scholarship also focuses on successful, pleasurable, and popular games. Thus, despite the proliferation of game genres and the diverse communities of game players, video-game affect and its implications have been understood within the relatively limited terms of fun.

Today's students of game studies are trained to analyze video games on the level of "procedural rhetoric," Ian Bogost's term for the semiotics of a game's interactive processes.[3] What new insights could be uncovered by supplementing this structural approach with a phenomenological perspective—by analyzing games for their *affective* rhetoric: the language of the feelings they invoke, how they communicate emotions to their players, how designing affect is interwoven in the art of game design.

More than just a matter of best-design practices, this question of fun versus no-fun gets at some of today's most heated debates about video games as a medium. Fun is central to the discourse of GamerGate, the extensive online harassment campaign currently being waged against female game designers and feminist games journalists. In anonymous forums and on social media, Gamer-Gaters have organized around the principle that video games shouldn't be subject to socially engaged critique. Rather, they should remain "just for fun." Long implicit in reactionary gamer culture, where "serious" concerns like discrimination and sexism have been deliberately silenced, the war over fun is no longer a subtle one. As the *New York Times* pointed out, the game that first incensed GamerGate harassers, Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest*, is notably no fun—nor is it meant to be.[4] The idea that such a game might bring into question dominant paradigms of entertainment has, it seems, sufficed to incite threats of real-life rape and murder.

Couched within such vitriol, it is easy to see how an insistence on fun can breed unanticipated social dangers. However, some of fun's pitfalls are less immediately obvious. As journalist Leigh Alexander has argued, foregrounding fun as a design principle holds back video games in their public perception as an art form.[5] Designers will need to allow for a wider range of emotional experiences if they hope to achieve legitimacy in a culture that currently views games as juvenile, fun as escapist, and real art as emotionally challenging. Those who argue for art-form status often compare the history of games to the history of film. Yet who would demand that all films be fun—or even beautiful? Think

of all the films that would have to be cut from the canon of cinema if the moving image had to be, in the most mainstream sense, entertaining. Those are the video games, many of them yet to be imagined, that we cast aside when we insist on fun.

And whose fun are we talking about, anyway? Fun as a focus for video games is problematic in part because fun itself is not a natural and invariable experience. It is culturally specific and personal. Asking this question (whose fun?) is, in fact, an ethical imperative for all games designers. For example, as Mohini Dutta has pointed out in arguing for the value of participatory design, what is fun in America isn't necessarily fun all over the world.[6] Designers of serious games run the risk of engaging in neo-imperialism when they design games for education in the global south that impose upon their players Western paradigms of entertainment. The point I want to make here is that "fun" is never "just fun." Fun is cultural, structural, gendered, and commonly hegemonic. Fun as an experience is deeply personal, yet fun as a construct is unavoidably political.

There are a few scholars and designers thinking about how video games defy expectations for fun. Jesper Juul and Jane McGonigal have both written about the importance of failure, a painful yet surprisingly ubiquitous experience in video games. In his book, *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*, Juul addresses what he calls the "paradox of failure": the fact that players continue to play games even when they know they will inevitably and often repeatedly lose.[7] Although Juul's insistence that failure is a critical part of almost every game is refreshing, his conceptualization of the "paradox of failure" hinges on a set of normative assumptions: that players hate failing and love winning, and that the painful experience of failing at games only makes sense if it drives players to succeed. Even though Juul focuses on experiences that are no fun, he still operates under the expectation that fun is the point of video games.

In her bestselling book *Reality Is Broken: Why Video Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*, McGonigal also addresses the paradox of failure.[8] She opens her chapter "Fun Failure and Better Odds of Success" by reporting that 80 percent of the time that players pick up a game controller, they fail. Like Juul, McGonigal presents the prevalence of failure in gaming as a mystery. "No one likes to fail," McGonigal conjectures, "so how can players fail so often and still love what they're doing?[9] McGonigal also explains away these no-fun moments by postulating that failure, when well-designed, is not actually failure at all. Instead, she claims, losing painfully actually reminds players of their agency, which in turn empowers them to do better and makes them feel good. In this equation, pain is repackaged as gain. McGonigal is offering what queer theorist Sara Ahmed has called "the promise of happiness," a perpetually distant goal that keeps the neoliberal subject in line with the hetero-norm.[10]

A set of unspoken stakes are operating beneath the surface of McGonigal's insistent optimism. Video games have struggled for decades with the reactionary notion, still circulated by the mainstream media, that they incite violence and turn innocent players into dangerous people. By insisting that games are fun even when they seem uncomfortable, public figures like McGonigal are able to push back against this negative image in hopes of transforming video games into something sweet, benign, uncomplicated, and fun: upstanding citizens in the society of contemporary media. The problem, of course, is that sweet and benign is rarely what we want from an artistic medium. We want to be challenged.

Whether no-fun experiences are being problematically repackaged or simply overlooked, the current discourse around fun in video games is still disappointingly limited. Game scholars now have the opportunity to attend to a wider range of player affects, to linger over rather than repurpose that which seems difficult or paradoxical. Fun itself can be deeply meaningful, but there is much more to video games than fun. As a blanket concept for making sense of the pleasure of playing games, fun is insufficient. It obscures all the moments that "fun" fails to capture: disappointment at an accidental fall from a treacherous platform, distress at the sight of an approaching enemy, a flash of bile when an opponent meets a player in combat and wins. Fun also fails to capture the nuance of happier moments: wonder at the sight of stunningly rendered terrain, elation upon mastering the perfect series of moves, the sublime release of relinquishing one's sense of self to ludic immersion. Video games have the power to communicate emotions as rich and difficult as befit the human experience.

〉〉〉 The Queer Potential of Having No Fun

Just as no-fun gives voice to new perspectives, it calls for new theoretical models. These models must account for and even intimately embrace the affective messiness of play. Contemporary queer theory is, I believe, a key site of potential for building alternate approaches to video games. The academic dialogue between game studies and queer studies is burgeoning, and much of it has coalesced around the annual Queerness and Games Conference at the University of California at Berkeley. In addition to looking at LGBTQ representation in video games and LGBTQ game communities, queer game studies scholars are interested in how games themselves can be read queerly. Queerness can be seen as a mode of designing, playing, and in this case even feeling games. Being queer is about being different and desiring differently,

and difference is precisely what we need to bring to our discussions of video games and the experience of play.

The work of Jack Halberstam offers a model for how arguments from contemporary queer theory can be applied to video games. In the mode of theorists like Lee Edelman, who argues that negative affect and anti-futurity offer queer subjects the possibility for political resistance, Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure* challenges readers to stop thinking about pain and disappointment as mere obstacles on the road to success.[11] Rather, Halberstam describes the "queer art of failure" as a mode of rejecting neoliberal values—the very values that tells us to be happy, wealthy, and healthy, and to have fun. Halberstam's book is particularly relevant to video games because it so clearly stands in dialogue with Jesper Juul's *The Art of Failure*. (Halberstam and Juul were not aware of each other's work when they gave their texts nearly identical names.)[12] I have argued elsewhere that reading these two works side by side suggests what I call "a queer art of failing at video games," a way of reading all games as queer through their intimate relationship to failure.[13] What I want to highlight here is how Halberstam's emphasis on negative affect can be used to reclaim the value of no-fun video games.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam emphasizes masochism, a term that remains conspicuously absent from Juul and McGonigal's explanations of ludic failure, as an important mode of resistance. Masochism, and kinkiness more broadly, are themselves forms of queerness, systems of counter-normative desires that, like the no-fun play experience, reject standard understandings of pleasure and create new possibility spaces for queer experience. Though commonly stigmatized, masochism is imagined by Halberstam as immensely powerful. In his chapter on masochism and feminism, Halberstam insists that his readers see willful self-destruction not as a pathological behavior from which the queer subject need rescuing, but as an ecstatic rejection of mainstream power structures:

> I propose a radical form of masochistic passivity that . . . offers up a critique of the organizing logic of agency and subjectivity itself. . . . Reconciling the irreconcilable tension between pleasure and death, the masochist tethers her notion of self to a spiral of pain and hurt. She refuses to cohere, refuses to fortify herself against the knowledge of death and dying, and seeks instead to be out of time altogether, a body suspended in time, space, and desire.[14]

Here, Halberstam's masochist steps outside of norms of longing and logic in order to embrace failure as such. By refusing to cohere, she sets aside the dictates of culture and reason and forms the beginning of her own alternate world, a queer

and nontemporal space in which the value of difficult experience is difficult experience itself.

Halberstam's vision of queer failure is disruptive, and no-fun as a system of counter-affects in video-game play also does the work of disruption. Both engender moments of what I would call "kinky disturbance," as adapted from Micha Cárdenas' "femme disturbance."[15] In these moments, implicitly heteronormative paradigms of failure and success are destabilized by the willing, playful embrace of pain and "game over." This is the counter in counter-affect: a pushback, a transgression. In constructing the term "counter-affects," I'm also drawing from Alexander Galloway's concept of "countergaming" and Karmen Mackendrik's concept of "counterpleasures," as well as Edmond Chang's "queergaming."[16] What unifies all of these terms is that they reframe play and desire as types of *doing* that can be done differently. They imagine the status quo as an institution whose very foundation can be shaken by queer ways of being and of playing. This is what separates no-fun games from empathy games, for example. The goal of no-fun is not simply to step into the skin of someone else's adversity. It is also personal, felt, embodied, alarming. Whereas empathy is educational, no-fun hurts for its own sake. In this way, no-fun models a type of queer worldmaking built on the liberating logic of masochism: that pleasure and its meaning cannot be bounded by the normative, that new worlds of meaning are created in the moment we embrace new worlds of experience.

〉〉〉 Why Having No-Fun Matters

Why is it so important to change how we imagine the relationship between fun and video games?

First, talking about no-fun is a way to talk about diversity. Fun as a monolithic principle silences the voices of marginalized gamers and promotes reactionary, territorial behavior from within privileged spaces of the games community. Moving beyond fun, by contrast, opens up whole genres of possibilities, many of them queer. The spirit of no-fun is the spirit of alternatives, of disruptions, of difference. No-fun is a valuable mode of thinking for game designers, for example, because it directs them to challenge assumptions about what games can and should do. It draws attention to emotional experience as something both personal and political and highlights the broader cultural implications of fun.

Talking about no-fun is also a way to talk about new scholarly and creative horizons. Every experience of annoyance, anger, sadness, and hurt comes with its own value, its own message, and its own transformative potential. Lingering over

no-fun play experiences offers the opportunity to explore video games themselves more fully. The relationship between game and player is intimate, tangled, and not always easy. Although mainstream developers designing their games for commercial success may still rely on fun as the golden standard of successful player engagement, independent developers and the burgeoning numbers of DIY designers have the opportunity to play with what's no fun. At the same time, emphasizing no-fun play experiences renders visible the emotional complexity that is already inherent to games, the blend of fun and no-fun that has been there all along.

When we, as players and scholars, talk only about fun experiences, we exclude from our discussions all of those moments in otherwise enjoyable games when we in fact had no fun. We also shut out of sight all of those games we've picked up and played for only a few hours, even a few minutes, and never played again because we found them boring, frustrating, bad. These too are meaningful experiences, meaningful games, games worthy of attention, not because they are good but because their badness is itself a rich site of meaning. Attending to no-fun-ness allows us to return to these moments of interaction previously dismissed, discarded, forgotten.

Opening up these discussions around fun also offers important opportunities for self-reflection. Are the affective experiences of all players imagined as equally limited, or are some players granted the privilege of more emotional complexity than others? A quick Google image search, for example, suggests that our culture envisions negative emotions like anger and boredom as potentially acceptable responses for male game players. In instances like this one, Google image search, although far from comprehensive, serves as a useful window into our culture's visual rhetoric for slippery concepts. Searching for "boys playing video games," or simply "playing video games," turns up scores of images of white, male children with controllers in their hands, expressing everything from ecstasy to confusion to rage. Searching for girls and people of color playing games turns up all happy smiling faces. Players who fall outside of the stereotypical gamer norm are only acceptable as visible subjects when they're having fun.

Exploring no-fun is also an integral step for those who wish to explore video games' artistic potential. Although GamerGaters fight back against the notion that games could be more than "just for fun," mainstream America continues to question whether the medium can rise beyond its juvenile reputation as mere entertainment. As has long been true for literature and film, emotional complexity is seen as a tenant of powerful storytelling. While the goal of game play is rarely storytelling in its traditional form, the same expectations hold true for video games, whose interactive experiences can be

as affectively rich as any narrative. However, I don't mean to suggest simply that games should evolve, become more serious, or grow-up. Instead, I want to emphasize that the potential for emotional complexity is already present in video games as we know them. Artistic legitimacy, if that is indeed something games wish to strive for, is already attainable if we shift our perspectives on the medium as it already exists today.

Perhaps most intriguing though is the subversive potential of no-fun as a queer mode of play. Rejecting fun means turning normative expectations on their heads and embracing the art of playing the wrong way. Lingering over sadness, annoyance, or pain frequently represents a rebellion against not just dominant expectations for video-game play, but also a rejection of the stated structure of a game itself. These counter-affects destabilize the status quo. They are simultaneously no fun and playful, unpleasant and pleasurable. By nature video-game interactivity seems to offer players agency, while simultaneously dictating and strictly limiting the extent of player choice. Embracing the no-fun enacts a different type of agency; it means choosing destruction, frustration, alarm. These are not generic experiences, not default choices. They are felt, in the body, as the struggle of the self wrestling with the messy intimacy of a queer partner: the game.

⟩⟩⟩ No-Fun Games: Annoying, Boring, Alarming, Sad

In the space that remains, I want to propose a basic taxonomy of no-fun games. Because we so rarely talk about play experiences that are not fun, we don't have a robust, medium-specific vocabulary for the ways that games as systems generate or facilitate alternative affect. Yet the types of games that could be called "no fun" are as vast and diverse as games themselves. This is because all games contain within themselves the potential to be no fun—even games widely considered great. There are also many different ways that a game can be no fun. Some games, perhaps the rarest subset, are no fun by design. They refuse to acknowledge the golden rule of designers (make it "fun first") and instead intentionally present players with unpleasant experiences. More commonly, games that would like to be fun simply fail. The mechanics they present to their players prove annoying rather than engaging, or their subject matter, envisioned as tantalizing, is perceived as unsettling. Alternatively, no-fun games can be simply so "bad" as to be unplayable, broken systems that take players on meaningless journeys with no rewards.

The categories I lay out here are by no means comprehensive or absolute, and

often they can be found overlapping in a single game. My hope is that this breakdown will serve as a starting point for new ways of thinking about games and game experiences—a preliminary framework that future scholarship on the affective rhetoric of video games can build on or push back against.

Disappointing games. These are games that seem to promise excitement yet fail to live up to expectations. At times, the gravity of disappointment can soar to surprising heights. It is only fitting to include here the title widely known as "the worst video game of all time": the 1982 *E.T.* game made for the Atari 2600. Part fact and part urban legend, the tale of *E.T.* tells us that the game was so bad that it nearly destroyed the video game industry. Indeed, in 1983, Atari did round up hundreds of thousands of unsold *E.T.* cartridges and bury them in a landfill in the New Mexico desert. In 2013, a documentary crew dug up the landfill, giving new life to the myth of *E.T.* as the game so horrible that its badness could only be trusted to an unmarked mass grave.[17] As reporter Tracey Lien has pointed out, what is fascinating about *E.T.* is that it really isn't that bad; it's just not good.[18] *E.T.* is a basic 2D adventure game. Players navigate E.T. through a series of interconnected screens in search of the machinery that will let the lovable extraterrestrial "phone home." But the map is confusing. The controls are glitchy. And the basic collection mechanic is tedious. Compared to the drama of Spielberg's movie, the gameplay is laughably underwhelming. Yet its content is hardly offensive. The "worst game ever made" is simply and notably disappointing.

Annoying games. One of the most common ways for video games to fail at being fun is to drift into the category of annoying. Annoying games make players irritated, frustrated, peeved—often by forcing them to repeat finicky or otherwise unrewarding tasks. *Super Monkey Ball* (2001–2012, Sega), a 3D precision puzzle game series, demonstrates this annoying quality. Players must roll a monkey inside a transparent bubble down a shifting narrow path, preventing the monkey from falling off the side of the course to its (temporary) doom. The game's controls are unforgiving, failure happens often, and after every mistake players must watch an animation of their monkey flying off into space. Ironically, McGonigal uses *Super Monkey Ball* to demonstrate how player failure is really fun, describing this animation as an entertaining reward that keeps players cheerful even after they lose. In my experience, the reality of playing *Super Monkey Ball* is very different. Watching these animations may be briefly entertaining for an observer, but for the player they function as punishment, irritating and unplayable moments when agency is denied.

Boring games. Like annoying games, boring games are common. They alienate players by failing (or refusing) to engage them in a way that feels rewarding.

Although many games arrive at boredom unintentionally, boredom itself can communicate a powerful message. Mattie Brice's *Mainichi* (2012) exemplifies how no-fun-ness can be distilled into procedure and implemented with intentionality into a game's design. *Mainichi* is a short and seemingly simple game; it only takes about two minutes to play. Players experience a day-in-the-life of Mattie, a transgender woman of color. The game's mechanics and visual language are deceptively simple: players maneuver the Mattie sprite through a few rudimentary environments— her apartment, a city street—as she heads to meet a friend for coffee. In typical RPG (role-playing game) style, the game prompts players to make decisions from drop-down menus. In this case, the decisions seem banal. Should Mattie put on makeup? Which side of the street should she walk on? Should she pay for her coffee with cash or credit card? However, these decisions have real implications in the context of gender identity and transphobia. After Mattie puts on makeup, for example, we read the scrolling text: "Good, now I feel like myself."

Whether mundane or meaningful, these choices are ultimately futile. *Mainichi* uses the tropes of the role-playing game genre to tempt players into thinking that their decisions matter. But there is no way to win the game, no magical combination of choices that will lead to a happy ending. Every play-through ends the same: with Mattie confiding in her friend that she is deeply unhappy—and then the game loops and begins again, equally banal, equally predictable, equally exhausting and demoralizing, and increasingly boring. This is how *Mainichi* brings its message to life in the body of the player. Boredom is the embodied experience communicated by the game's affective rhetoric. Players who feel bored when playing are getting the point— even if they don't realize they're getting it—and the point is that leading the life of the marginalized and underprivileged is no fun.

Alarming Games. Another important category of "no-fun" games are those that players experience as alarming, unsettling, or otherwise too uncomfortable to play. This category usefully illustrates the subjective nature of no-fun-ness. Many mainstream games contain violent or sexual content that some players reject as overly objectionable; yet millions of other players experience these same games as fun (e.g., the *Grand Theft Auto* series).

Other games seem to incite more universal reactions of alarm. The infamous *Custer's Revenge* (Mystique, 1982), in which players navigate falling arrows to repeatedly sexually assault a Native American woman, epitomizes this type of game. *Custer's Revenge* is commonly referenced as an example of the most egregiously racist and sexist titles in the pantheon of video games.[19] Yet rarely is the game discussed with a consideration of what it is like to play. This is likely

because the very act of playing it seems morally unacceptable. Yet I would argue that simply knowing that the game is offensive does not suffice to make sense of the uncomfortable feelings it inspires. It is equally, if not more, important to experience the alarm that comes with playing—that worrying sense that we are complicit when we maneuver the cowboy toward his goal. The lesson we learn from this game is an embodied lesson. In my experience, after players overcome the initial ethical hurdle of *Custer's Revenge*, they quickly lose sight of the game's problematic content. They come to experience their objective as abstract: dodge obstacles, earn points. This is important, because it serves as a clear illustration of how games more generally can convince us to accept ourselves as unquestioning agents of violence. However, in order to see that for ourselves (and about ourselves), we need to be able to step outside play as fun.

Sad games. Sad games make players melancholy, heartbroken, even tearful. Like many genres of no-fun-ness, sadness frequently appears as one among several affective elements of a play experience. Thus, though sadness might be imagined as the opposite of fun, it is not necessarily mutually exclusive with games that are commonly considered good. However, sadness is rarely a central subject in discussions surrounding these games. *Gone Home* (Fullbright Company, 2013), a queer coming of age story that has received positive attention from the LGBTQ games community, illustrates this juxtaposition well. In her review for Polygon.com, games journalist Danielle Riendeau describes *Gone Home* as a "master class in how to tell a personal, affecting story in a video game."[20] However, little critical attention has been paid specifically to the feelings of sadness that *Gone Home* stirs in its players. In my discussions with other queer-identified folks, many have reported crying while playing the game. These tears are evidence of the game's ability to connect with players whose own difficult personal histories mirror those represented on screen. Yet these tears should not be dismissed as merely personal. Sadness is woven into the fabric of the game itself, which communicates through emotion as much as through narrative.

Games that hurt (by design). In addition to games that communicate negative emotions, like frustration or sadness, some games intentionally play with the experience of pain. In these games, suffering is built into the core mechanics. The pleasure of such games is an inherently masochistic pleasure, a pleasure that playfully calls into question the nature of fun and taunts players with the enticing taboo of their own demise. Both *Super Hexagon* and *Stair Dismount*, discussed above, are examples of game that hurt on purpose, where hurt is built into the game. The former is designed to "punish," whereas the latter is designed to tantalize and torture by proxy. Other games, like the *Burnout* racing series

(Electronic Arts, 2001–14), emphasize self-destruction by encouraging players to drive their cars into the most devastating possible collisions. Even games like *FarmVille* (Zynga, 2009) play with the dynamics of pain and pleasure through mastery and submission. The free-to-play model creates a contract between game and player not unlike that between dom and sub, in which the player agrees to start and stop playing at the will of the game. It is worth noting, however, that these kinky play experiences, though seemingly counter-normative, nonetheless represent an affective inclination *toward* the game system. That is, players experience hurt in accordance with the design of the game, conforming to its rule sets in order to succeed through suffering.

Games that hurt (by player choice). Any game can be made no-fun if a player chooses to reject win conditions and play the wrong way. Playing the wrong way can itself take many forms. Most visibly "wrong" are those play experiences that lead to death rather than success. Juul insists that loss is painful. However, such pain is also a masochistic pleasure, a choice, a creative act of rebellion that operates within yet pushes back *against* the system of a game. When I choose to play battle mode in *Mario Kart 8* by repeatedly driving my car into a deadly sand pit, I am deciding to reject fun and deciding to play for (and with) pain, though the game itself gives me every indication that I am supposed to strive for success.

A particularly interesting example of this type of emergent, painful behavior can be found in *Get On Top*, an unassuming mini-game hidden within the party game *Sportsfriends* (Die Gute Fabrick, 2013). In this seemingly simple two-player game, two crash-test-dummy-esque figures stand on a flat stage holding hands. Each player, controlling one dummy, attempts to smack (or more likely flop) the opponent's body to the ground. Any successful hit will send abruptly dislodge the opponent's head. Like pendulums, the figures' limbs flip effortlessly and absurdly; almost any movement of the joysticks results in a K.O. In theory, players rack up points based on their number of successful kills, but death is so easy to come by that the nature of the game quickly shifts. Pairs of players soon find themselves working together to explore the more dramatic and unlikely ways to decapitate their avatars. Designed as a competitive game, emergent play reshapes *Get on Top* as a collaborative exercise in mutual self-destruction.

What unifies each of these categories of no-fun games is an emphasis on negative experience as such. Rather than simply inspiring players to play harder, faster, or better, these unpleasant emotions communicate their own messages. At times these messages run counter to the dominant narratives of the games themselves; certainly they run counter to dominant thinking around fun. In this sense, they form a network of counter-affects, negative emotions that challenge

how we imagine playing video games can, does, and should feel.

⟩⟩⟩ A Call to Play beyond Fun

No-fun is ultimately an imperative as well as a mode of experience. It is a call to queer worldmaking, a call to build alternate spaces both personal and cultural, a call to think about masochistic play as a site of potential rather than pathology. It is a call to think, play, and study games queerly—to challenge what is straight and normal, to find the counter-normative in our games but also in ourselves. Even with no LGBTQ characters on the screen, any game has the potential to become a disruptive site of queer subversion when we choose to play in our own way, the wrong way. Not all games are fun, but all games can be no-fun. Turning our attention to the seemingly unpleasant allows us to uncover underexplored modes of experience, both as players and queer subjects in the world.

No-fun is also a call back to our bodies, a call to feel what we aren't supposed to want to feel, a call to resist the normative thinking that tell us that the only games that matter are games that are fun, and that the only players who matter are the ones who have fun playing them. In this sense, no-fun is also a challenge: a challenge to the status quo and a challenge to ourselves. Let us play boredom. Let us play anger. Let us play what hurts. Let us play in ways that are just as different and just as queer as we are as players. And let us take that hurt, modeled by the embodiment of gameplay, and carry it with us beyond the game, driving us to find other playful, powerful, and overlooked sites of counter-affective potential in our lives both on-screen and off.

NOTES

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