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Designing Self-Care

Affect and Debility in #SelfCare

Kara Stone

Abstract: Are games addicting, anxiety-provoking, and manipulative, or are they calming, connecting, and healing? This paper looks at the companion game app #SelfCare by studio TRU LUV and collaborator Eve Thomas alongside affect theory on psychosocial disability (often referred to as mental illness). #SelfCare consists of mini-games navigated through a home screen of a person lying in bed under the covers who »refuses to leave bed today.« The mini-games are all uncompetitive, unscored, and untimed, such as breathing to the rhythm of an expanding flower, sorting laundry, and petting a cat. The website states that »In this universe, our goal is simply to feel better. There's no winning, no failure, no score. No difficulty, no ads, no notifications. There is just us and our feelings.« Although the current self-care movement is trending toward forced positivity, neoliberalism, and aesthetics, the game #SelfCare incorporates what one might label negative or discouraging, such as refusing to get out of bed, not answering thousands of emails, and words like »disconnected.« I argue that #SelfCare maps onto Lauren Berlant's idea of lateral agency, a sort of self-suspension away from the forward motion of life – not necessarily getting better but also not getting worse. It is not meant to cure psychosocial disability but to give those of us that experience it a moment of relief. In queer feminist affect theory, feelings cannot so clearly be labeled as positive or negative; in fact, feeling ›good‹ can be a direction toward heteronormativity and ›bad‹ affect can be a resource for political action. Thus, any game that aims to promote well-being is best served utilizing ›negative‹ feelings, not ignoring them. The negativity and depiction of depression in #SelfCare is a strong force in connecting the players to the character in the game as well as to the game world. Using affect theory and disability studies, I provide a conscientious evaluation of the ways technology is positioned both as savior and detrimental to psychosocial disability.

Keywords: Affect; Psychosocial Disability; Debility; Game Studies; Game Design

Schlagworte: Affekt; Psychosoziale Behinderung; Fragilität; Game Studies; Game Design

1. Introduction

Are games addicting, anxiety-provoking, and socially isolating, or are they calming, connecting, and healing? Mainstream media often depicts videogames as detrimental to one's mental health; they are said to cause antisocial behaviors, aggression, and violence. Many game studies scholars and designers, on the other hand, paint games as a medium that alleviates stress, promotes socialization, and has the potential to instigate great social change based on games' affordances for systems thinking and safe failure (McGonigal 2010; Macklin 2013; Isbister 2017). This paper analyzes the affective sphere of videogames and the ways in which they conceptualize, formulate, and help or hurt psychosocial disability. This will be done by looking at TRU LUV and collaborator Eve Thomas' *#SelfCare*, a mobile app released in 2018 that intends to change the players' anxious relationships to their phones. I use queer feminist affect theory and disability studies to theorize affect and debility, the imperative of neoliberal self-care, negative feelings as a political resource, and relief versus cure.

TRU LUV is a studio based in Toronto, Canada. It has released two »companions,« the term it uses to describe the interactive apps it produces: *BreatheLuv*, a breathing visualizer app, and *#SelfCare*. *#SelfCare* consists of mini-games navigated through a home screen of a person lying in bed under the covers who never leaves bed. The mini-games are all uncompetitive, unscored, and untimed. They consist of breathing to the rhythm of an expanding flower, sorting laundry, petting a cat, pulling a tarot card, word scramble, and using a massage tool. The game has customizable elements such as skin tone for the person in bed, bed sheet patterns, the cat's collar, and what objects are displayed on an altar. TRU LUV collaborates with different artists to design these customizations as well as more vocabulary for the word scramble. The aesthetics of the game are pastel and soothing, with nothing flashing or popping up. Their website calls players to »awaken your slumbering cat and give it some deserved affection, sort your laundry by color, indulge in a tarot card reading, or receive guidance from your favorite plant. It's your safe, comfortable space where you give yourself permission to feel better« (TRU LUV 2018).

Fig. 1 & 2: Screenshots of the home screen and altar in #Self-Care



TRU LUV's CEO Brie Code, a lead programmer at Ubisoft who quit to pursue making different kinds of games, aligns the design of #SelfCare with research on *tend-and-befriend*, a little-known stress response that expands the popularly known fight-or-flight response. Code writes of playing popular videogames:

There are a lot of things flashing on the screen, and there's danger and it's shocking and it's fun, that's a fight-or-flight response. With fight-or-flight, your sympathetic nervous system kicks in and releases adrenaline followed by dopamine. If you like games like this, it's probably because adrenaline and dopamine are very enjoyable. Your pupils dilate. Your heart beats faster. Your airways open up. And you feel exhilarated. You feel alive. You feel powerful. (Code 2017)

The majority of videogames aim to affect people in this way. Games purposefully build frustration then manufacture its release. The most common emotional responses in games are panic, aggression, and frustration – emotions associated with adrenaline. These are quite a limited array that a limited number of people enjoy or pursue in media. Code continues:

But not everyone likes these kinds of games. I don't. My friends don't. And I think my friends find games like this boring not only because they aren't interested in more stories about callous white men, and not only because they don't know how

the controls work or don't get the references to geek culture, but also because they don't get an adrenaline high. They have a different response to stress. (Code 2017)

Here Code points to ways in which one can design for marginalized populations beyond representation and cultural accessibility, to a biological level. To her, the underlying structure of the majority of videogames cater to masculine power fantasies based on frustration and release, citing it as triggering the hormone adrenaline:

My friends and I don't like adrenaline, but there's something similar that is probably going on with us. It's called tend-and-befriend. Like fight-or-flight, tend-and-befriend is an automatic, physiological reaction to threatening situations. If you experience tend-and-befriend, it's because your body releases oxytocin or vasopressin when you're stressed, followed by opioids. This calms your sympathetic nervous system so you don't get the flood of adrenaline. Instead of wanting to fight or to flee, you stay relatively calm, but aware. Your pupils dilate, you become fearless, and you are less sensitive to pain. You instinctively want to protect your loved ones, to seek out your allies, and to form new alliances. Oxytocin intensifies social feelings, and opioids feel extremely warm and lovely. I don't like adrenaline but I really, really like this. This feels delicious. Luscious. Powerful. (Code 2017)

Code seeks to design games that appeal to a broader audience based not only on aesthetic and representation but also on the way the fundamental design of the game brings out a biological reaction. The aim of TRU LUV is to make relaxing experiences that »leave you feeling calm, connected, and invigorated« (TRU LUV website 2018). This paper will not take up Code's use of pop psychology's tend-and-befriend, nor the biochemical reactions to game design; instead, I will offer a de-medicalized reading of the game based on the affect and disability, examining both the represented affect in the app and the proposed emotional reactions from playing it. This is not to say Code's use of tend-and-befriend and focus on biology and pop psychology is »wrong« – certainly I feel kinship with Code and TRU LUV's desire to design games differently, that they are most often created to bring out particular »masculinized« feelings, that we need to design games that create a variety of feelings, and that we need to work toward healing debilitated communities. I come to these same political goals by using a different theoretical lens.

2. Psychosocial Disability and Affect

Although #SelfCare is not marketed specifically for those who identify as having a psychosocial disability, it is concerned with *debility* as well as feelings that are present or even foundational for psychosocial disabilities. Psychosocial disability is an internationally recognized term under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It is commonly understood as mental illness or mental disability. The term ›psychosocial disability‹ points to the psychological as an individual entity where emotions are thought to reside, as well the social: the cultural factors that influence emotional unwellness. As of August 2018, the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) estimate that one in four adult Americans, 61 million, have a disability that impacts major life activities. Disability here is defined as: »Mobility (serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs), Cognition (serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions), Hearing (serious difficulty hearing), Vision (serious difficulty seeing), Independent living (difficulty doing errands alone), Self-care (difficulty dressing or bathing).« They also note that these »data show that disability is more common among women, non-Hispanic American Indians/Alaska Natives, adults with lower income, and adults living in the South Census region of the United States,« (CDC 2018) indicating the intersectional ways in which oppression breeds debility. It is important to note that the CDC lists inability to self-care as one mode of measuring disability; however, this refers to the capacity for the labor of taking care of oneself, not the way in which self-care has been commonly understood now: something more akin to self-soothing or self-love.

I cite the CDC's statistics and categorizations not to encourage the dichotomy between disabled and non-disabled, but the opposite – to see ways in which debility is pervasive. I follow Jasbir K. Puar's practice of »critical deployment of the concepts of debility and capacity to rethink disability through, against, and across the disabled/non-disabled binary...I want to explore the potential of affective tendencies to inform these assemblages of debility, capacity, and disability...« (2017, 2). The concept of debility aids in thinking through the ways in which certain experiences associated with disability are pervasive and insidious to the global north. These experiences and affects circulate through bodies without necessarily attaching an identity category to them, or acting as a binary yes/no box to checkmark. Affect is a particularly useful concept to think through experiences of psychosocial disability, most of which are defined by what is medicalized and categorized as excessive, incorrect, or a limited capacity for emotions and emotional behavior. I will often use ›feelings‹ in the way that Ann Cvetkovich does:

I tend to use *affect* in a generic sense, rather than in the more specific Deleuzian sense, as a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that in-

cludes impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways...I also like to use *feeling* as a generic term that does some of the same work: naming the undifferentiated »stuff« of feeling; spanning the distinctions between emotion and affect central to some theories; acknowledging the somatic or sensory nature of feelings as experiences that aren't just cognitive concepts or constructions. I favor feeling in part because it is intentionally imprecise, retaining the ambiguity between feelings as embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive experiences. (Cvetkovich 2012, 4)

Emotions, feelings, and affect do not point to something that is somehow ›pre-cultural,‹ ›raw,‹ or apolitical. Though they are connected to the biological, the biological is always already cultured, in line with Judith Butler's work on the sexed body (1993), and Elizabeth Wilson's *Gut Feminism* (2015), which argues for the inclusion of biology in feminist theory without holding it up as the ultimate truth. In my theorization, a feeling is never just personal; it speaks of a culture that fosters, shares, disvalues, or represses certain feelings. Feelings don't just exist in our heads; as Sara Ahmed (2004) argues, they circulate between bodies and actually surface that body, making it legible. Videogames aim to regulate our feelings, intending to make us feel frustrated, excited, aggressive, satisfied, or, in the case of *#SelfCare*, ›better.‹

3. Feeling Better

In mainstream and pop psychology (often research that has been utilized and sometimes misconstrued by the media and other non-psychologists) health is construed as good and desirable, and disability is construed as negative and undesirable. In terms of emotions, feeling bad is bad, feeling good is good. If one exists in the grouping of ›ill,‹ it is deemed necessary for them to at least try to move to the ›healthy‹ group, even if it is impossible. Being ›healthy‹ and ›happy‹ is a neoliberal imperative, an individual's responsibility that upholds capitalist, ableist, and heteronormative society. In her 2010 book *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed illustrates the ways in which the neoliberal directive to be happy orients one toward certain paths, such as heterosexuality, that are supposed to make them happy, and away from others that are thought to make them unhappy, such as queerness. Happiness has become an individual responsibility and a cultural disciplinary technique. This imperative to be happy, to feel ›good‹ or other emotions thought to be positive, is profitable to capitalism – or rather, first being unhappy then wanting to be happy is profitable to capitalism. There is much incentive to keep marginalized groups debilitated yet desiring to be otherwise. Barbara Gunnell states that »the search for happiness is certainly enriching a lot of people.

The feel-good industry is flourishing. Sales of self-help books and CDs that promise a more fulfilling life have never been higher« (cited in Ahmed 2010, 3). The self-help industry relies on positive psychology and the societal pressure to feel good. In the late 2010s, self-help has transformed into the trendy ›self-care,‹ an idea that encourages people to know and listen to their needs, and to find activities that refuel energy rather than depleting it. The imperative for self-care is disseminated in the form of pseudo inspiring Instagram posts telling us to cut toxic people out of our lives and advertisements telling us to buy bath bombs. It encourages us to cancel plans and stay home, retreating from public and political life. Self-care has become largely commercialized, a selfish and independent activity, and in the domain of neoliberal white feminists seeking self-pleasure rather than justice for all oppressed groups.

The current state of self-care culture is an extremely unfortunate appropriation of the original empowering message from Audre Lorde who famously stated, »Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare« (1988, 130). These words are now on Instagram posts that want to sell you face masks, decontextualized from the voice who said it: a black queer woman living in the United States, a country not built to care for black lives. While Lorde was struggling with cancer, she was teaching at a university in New York City that did not accept her proposal to teach in the summers and go to a warmer climate for winters, which greatly soothed her health conditions (Gumbs 2012). It is one thing for women of color to care for themselves when the world is not built to care for them. Recognizing the intersectional aspects of self-care means we must care for ourselves when the societal structures systemically do not, but we must also work to change those structures rather than applying responsibility solely on the individual. Furthermore, Lorde's conceptualization of self-care does not orient toward happiness necessarily; it is about survival (Gumbs 2012). ›Feeling better‹ means feeling like life is livable, rather than having optimized individual happiness to its fullest extent. In fact, ›feeling better‹ may include an embrace of the negative.

Author of *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Ann Cvetkovich writes that the goal of her own work is to depathologize negative affects so they are not medicalized to the extent of their dismissal as a resource for political action. She is careful not to suggest that mental illness and ›bad‹ affects should be transformed into positivity: depression »retains its associations with inertia and despair, if not apathy and indifference, but these affects become sites of publicity and community formation« (2007, 460). Bad experiences and so-called negative feelings are not forced to transform into a positive celebration, but instead are framed as political statements that have the potential to pull people together in action for personal and social change. On a societal level, anger, despair, and mourning fuel protests and social movements. Labels such as positive and negative, though possibly useful as

a shorthand, end up saying more about cultural beliefs and expectations of emotions rather than any inherent negativity or positivity.

The app *#SelfCare* simultaneously plays into current constructs of neoliberal self-care culture while also undermining it through the embrace of negativity and healing as a never-ending process. Firstly, its business model aims to be more ethical than that of most studios. It is a free app with in-app purchases for customization, designed by clearly credited artists who get paid with each purchased customization. The purchasable customizations include bed textiles, backgrounds for the altar, and different word scramble vocabulary. No necessary gameplay needs to be purchased and it never locks the player out, preventing them from playing. The skin tone of the characters is highly customizable with three sliding scales. Though personalization and customization plays into personality-through-consumerism, the fact that the game is free with no ads, and that it collaborates with and credits the various artists for purchasable content is a much a higher ethical standard than most other apps selling wellness.

The goal of *#SelfCare* is to use phones to make people feel better instead of worse. It utilizes common rhetoric that orients people toward feeling good, but there is a difference between feeling ›better‹ and feeling ›happy‹ or even ›good.‹ Code writes: »How do you feel about your phone? I feel stressed and manipulated by my phone« (Code n.d). Phones have become an object of anxiety and attachments, of bad news and endless scrolling, of constantly working while not literally at work. We play games on our phones designed to create frustration and release, work and reward. Social media and notifications operate in a similar way. *#SelfCare* has not set out to cure all debility or negative feelings, but to change our relationship with our phones. Code states, »Now, when I feel a spike of anxiety and unconsciously reach for my phone, if I end up in *#SelfCare* instead of a game, I calm myself, and put down the phone a moment later feeling better instead of worse. When we can achieve this for you also, we've succeeded. <3« (Code n.d). Feeling worse is not an inherent negative, but the widespread and daily anxious and addictive interactions with phones do not need to be the only affective capacity phones offer. In a pessimistic view, *#SelfCare* may be a form of what Lauren Berlant calls ›cruel optimism,‹ something one desires that is actually detrimental to them. It expects the player to use the phone in hopes of finding relief from it. It is possible, however, that *#SelfCare* helps build a different relationship with one's phone.

Though I argue against the positive and negative binary of feelings, I acknowledge that feeling better and feeling worse means something different for those of us who experience disability. Feeling better is not necessarily feeling happy, but that life is becoming livable. ›Livable‹ means accepting the so-called negative feelings. It is impossible – and undesirable – for many people with psychosocial disability to eradicate all difficult, unwanted, sometimes crushing feelings. Instead,

the negative becomes a source of knowledge, relating, community organizing, and social change.

Although #SelfCare aims to make the player ›feel better,‹ it does so by accepting ›feeling bad.‹ The companion tells the player, »We're staying home for the day. We refuse to leave our bed. And it's okay.« It acknowledges that they have thousands of emails to read, but it takes away the possibility and pressure of reading them. They never do get out of bed. The goal of the game is not to overcome depression, a common narrative arch concerning disability, but to create rituals that make life sustainable.

Fig. 3 & 4: Screenshots of a text prompt and the word scramble in #SelfCare



Of particular interest to me is the word scramble game. The tutorial begins, »We can't put our life in order but how about these words?« In this mini game, a word or phrase is partly filled, and the remaining letters are floating nearby. The player drags each letter into its place. It begins with words like *pessimism*, *loathing*, *self-censorship*, and *judgmental*. It states, »Sometimes we need to spell out the bad to create the good.« As the game is played, the words become less negative, but not necessarily positive either. There are words like *pause*, *antidote*, *amygdala*, *instant*

message, and *digital detox*. The words relate to self-care, feelings, and online culture. As *#SelfCare* is made to be played when one is feeling stressed and depressed, starting with negative feelings can be a relief, rather than an immediate pressure and expectation to feel happy. This embrace of the negative affectively pulls the player into judgment-free self-reflection and relatability. It makes the experience accessible rather than off-puttingly positive.

4. Companion Care

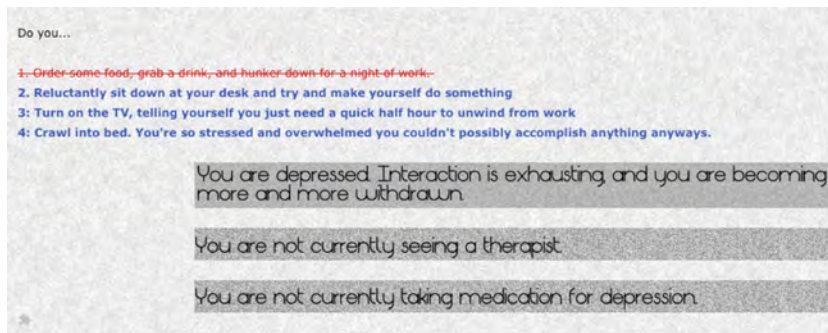
TRU LUV calls *#SelfCare* a companion, a new category of product. Calling it a companion situates the relationship between the piece and players differently than calling it a game, app, or artwork. It does not play into dominant views of author as *auteur* and total meaning-maker, nor the player as the source of all meaning. It also sets up different expectations for the piece; if it is called a game, one might expect (or demand) it to be winnable, competitive, and keep track of scores. Using the »companion« sets up expectations of care and conviviality, something alive or animated (Chen 2012). Code writes that under this companion framework, »I don't tell my phone what I need, and my phone doesn't tell me what I need. Instead, we work together towards shared goals« (*#SelfCare* website, 2018). In using *#SelfCare*, the player does not necessarily create a version of themselves to take care of. There is a person in bed, but we only ever see limbs. It is both representative of the player and someone else the player is to take care of.

#SelfCare's tutorial uses »we« and »us« to describe how to interact with it: »We simply listen to our feelings.« »You are welcome here with us anytime.« »Together, we make our own rituals.« In calling it a companion, it is pointing to the need for connection and community. Calling an app a companion relates to Donna Haraway's notion of the companion species (Haraway 2003), the bonding of different species that not only co-exist but whose lives are interrelated. In »Training in the Contact Zone: Power, Play, and Invention in the Sport of Agility« (2008) Haraway talks in-depth about her dog Cayenne, stating that »play is the something that is neither one nor two, which brings us into the open where purposes and functions are given a rest« (Haraway 2008, 468). Within the gameplay of *#SelfCare*, one activity is petting a digital representation of a cat. This acts as a representational parallel of a companion species, but furthermore the phone itself acts as an in-between of a companion species and a technology that makes us cyborgs. In calling itself a companion, *#SelfCare* reflects the need for connection and community while, perhaps hypocritically, reiterating self-care as an isolated and individual activity.

5. Affective Design

The majority of videogames are designed to perpetuate a cycle of frustration and monetary gratification, of work and reward, in order bring out addictive behavior in players. To be addicted to a videogame may not be the designer's actual goal, nor am I arguing that videogame addiction should be a medicalized category. However, game studios benefit when their players continue playing – and playing and playing. Players keep paying subscriptions, buying DLCs, writing (unpaid) walkthroughs, stream (unpaid advertising), buy the sequel, and more. AAA studios are capitalist industries that seek profit through creating 60+ hour experiences for 60+ dollars. To create something that is engaging for 60+ hours, most designers turn to the standard game design model of work and reward. Code describes it in terms of biochemical psychology: »Game design theory is based on an adrenaline/dopamine response to stress. Game designers aim to stress the player, and then give the player opportunities to win a challenge« (Code n.d). This style of system makes players feel as if they have accomplished something, even if in reality all they have accomplished is to sit in front of a screen for 60 hours and disassociate from their feelings – in itself not necessarily »negative« but the intense desire (almost a necessity) to *feel productive* is an internalization of current neoliberal capitalist culture where one's worth is determined by productivity. Many games are designed to tap into this cultural desire, creating a cycle of work and reward that is closely planned out in order to keep the player playing for as long as possible. Notably, breaks are rarely designed into games. If a player chooses to take a break, it is a disruption to the flow of the narrative or gameplay. Short games, common in the indie and alt industry, are short because of lack of resources rather than concern over the attention economy. To keep the player engaged, games often employ a strategy of becoming more »complex« in the form of becoming more stressful as the game progresses. To grow bored – or fulfilled before the designer expects – is seen as a failure of design. For most videogame designers and studios, the only reason to stop playing a game is when that game is completed, regardless of if it is one hour or 200 hours.

This dominant mode of game design benefits from and contributes to the neoliberal capitalist directive to *always be productive*. Measurement of self-worth is often determined by productivity. Disability is most often measured through capacity for productivity; what we can or cannot *do* – not solely the experience or extremity of feelings, but what our feelings enable or disable us from doing. Take *Depression Quest* (Zoe Quinn 2013) as an example. The bulk of the story's text is about feeling bad, but all the choices are what the player character cannot do; they cannot work, go outside, or talk to their friends. The positive and productive choices are crossed out; the depressed person cannot do those things.

Fig. 5: Screenshot of the interactable hyper-text in *Depression Quest*

Both culturally and clinically, depression becomes legitimized, seen as a ›real condition or disability, when it prevents a person from performing tasks as they should or are expected to. Emphasizing the ability for productivity transforms the depressed person into not someone with a specific set of emotional experiences, but someone who is failing to uphold their position as a subject of capitalism. Game design based on work, frustration, reward, and release tap into the cultural necessity of feeling productive to feel worthwhile.

#SelfCare has aspects that understand debility through inability: the companion character cannot get out of bed, cannot organize their drawers, cannot look at their phone or computer. But it does not enact the common narrative archetype of moving from unproductivity to productivity, or disability to ability. The aforementioned things that the companion character cannot do are not conveyed through text, but on a level of design. TRU LUV and Eve Thomas utilize a distinctly unique approach to game design that reconfigures the goal of successful design. There is no win-state in *#SelfCare*. The mini-games have no score, nor do they have a designed endpoint; the player decides when to exit each mini-game. There is no increase in difficulty. These design choices may strike some people as un-engaging and boring – and in fact, that is the whole point. Thomas and Code write, »For 3-5 minutes you can escape to a calm and soothing room, do some relaxing, meditative tasks, and return to your life refreshed and ready to face your stresses« (*#SelfCare* Presskit n.d.). The companion is to be played with for short bursts. It is strategically designed in order to *not* keep the player playing for as long as possible. Though the diegetic character never leaves bed, the game is not designed in a way to keep *the player* in bed playing videogames. It is meant to be played until the player feels »better,« which is unquantifiable by the designers but knowable to the players. The player and companion's »lifeforce« is measured through a sun that rises as the mini-games are played (not dependant on winning or completion, just played). Once it is full, nothing happens. There is no reward, nor does it lock

you out of playing the mini-games. Operating in a phone-addicted, goal-oriented, productivity-obsessed culture, this sun works as a nice reminder that one *can* stop looking at the screen now.

#SelfCare is the opposite of gamification, coming at a time when the gamification of self-care is the obvious way for game designers to deal with psychosocial disability and cultural experiences of debility. Jane McGonigal's *SuperBetter* (2014) is in most ways the exact opposite. Its goals are the same: to make the player feel better, but it takes an approach more dominant in game design and gamification. *SuperBetter* works like an incentivized task list, using the rhetoric of gaming such as »bad guys,« »power ups,« and »quests.« The player sets a goal for themselves and tracks progress. It is fanatically goal oriented. *#SelfCare*, on the other hand, configures wellness not as something that is *won* or *achieved*, but as a constant, never-ending process. One must engage with their feelings each day, making a mundane ritual that is not oriented toward feeling happy as an end-goal. It de-gamifies itself, taking away often definitional aspects of videogames like win conditions, progress, and challenge.

#SelfCare is a needed intervention into theories of game design that hold up systems modeling, learning through process, and safe failure as the key features that hold the power of videogames. It does not model a system with the intention of educating the player on how to understand it or intervene. There is no way to fail, so there is no »safe failure.« It is an affect-based design that is built around considering how the players feel when playing, and what feelings they have when they instigate play. It creates a space that does not repress or erase negative feelings and has an intentional yet immeasurable affective outcome.

6. But Can It Cure Me?

To return to my opening question: Are games addicting, anxiety-provoking, and manipulative, or are they calming, connecting, and healing? I have argued that the majority of videogames employ addictive tactics and utilize anxiety and frustration to manufacture release and reward. I have also argued that *#SelfCare* is structured in a way that accepts negative feelings while creating a space for calm, connection, and feeling »better,« a better that does not necessarily denote »happy« or »good,« but livable and sustainable. I want to be careful to not suggest that *#SelfCare* or any piece of media can be a singular cure for psychosocial disability and debility. I would not use the word *therapeutic*, as if a videogame or companion app is akin to therapy. The term *therapeutic* has many connotations, often used to be synonymous to *soothing*, rather than the difficult and messy work of therapy. However, *#SelfCare* does promote healing – in the sense that it is additive to a

lifestyle set up with activities and behaviors that are life-sustaining rather than life-draining.

The mundane, the daily, and the ritualistic are sites of life-sustaining and life-building habits, just as they can be for life-draining work. For the debilitated, life maintenance becomes a primary focus, what Lauren Berlant calls the »ordinary work of living on« (2007, 761). She theorizes »slow death,« a phrase referring »to the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence« (2007, 754). It conceptualizes the gradual wearing out of people, specifically the debilitated. Slow death does not progress linearly toward an end nor does it denote advancement in a slow pace toward death. Instead, it is a lateral movement that steps outside the neoliberal understanding of the linear progression of life. Thinking in this way, life narratives are created not through events that have memorable impact but as episodes that make up day-to-day experiences while not individually changing much of anything. Debility breeds not in distinct, traumatic events such as time-framed singular phenomena but in day-to-day living, the ways in which »time ordinarily passes, how forgettable most events are, and, overall, how people's ordinary perseverations fluctuate in patterns of undramatic attachment and identification« (2007, 760). The mundane is commonly ignored and taken for granted, yet is a site of potential for healing. Cvetkovich states that healing is:

open-ended and marked by struggle, not by magic bullet solutions or happy endings, even the happy ending of social justice that many political critiques of therapeutic culture recommend. It suggests that when asking big questions about what gives meaning to our lives, or how art or politics can promote social justice or save the planet, ordinary routines can be a resource. The revolution and utopia are made there, not in giant transformations or rescues. (2012, 80)

For many people with psychosocial disability or in other states of debility, healing is a never-ending process. Instead of orienting toward an end-goal of being healed, of winning through overcoming disability, healing is a constant activity that needs to be addressed regularly. In this way, #SelfCare functions not as a stand-alone piece that will revolutionize relationships with technology or cure anyone of bad feelings once and for all, but to offer a short *relief* – one that moves toward sustaining life, rather than depleting it like forms of slow death such as smoking and over-eating. It offers a moment outside the forward motion of life that slowly over time contributes to habits that help people continue the ongoing process of healing by embedding itself into one's daily mundane lives.

7. Conclusion

#SelfCare utilizes a unconventional model of game design that puts at the forefront the affective experiences of psychosocial debility while creating a ritual of relief that promotes the process of healing. Whereas the vast majority of videogames are designed to keep players engaged with no designed breaks until the end of the game, this companion is meant to be played for only a few minutes each day. This is done through allowing the player to become calm and bored, and stop playing, rather than bombarding them with adrenaline and pressure. Emotional wellness is never won or complete. It is an ongoing process that needs to be incorporated into daily life. *#SelfCare* plays with cultural notions of neoliberal self-care while also pointing to self-care's political roots of survival and community. It aims to make people ›feel better‹ while not demanding positivity from its players. On its own, *#SelfCare* will not cure anyone – but it can contribute to creating a culture more invested in creating livable affective experiences. Both self-care and *#SelfCare* are Band-Aids of sorts until collective society is set up in a way to take care of marginalized and debilitated lives.

Ludography

#SELCARE (self-published, 2018, TRU LUV)
DEPRESSION QUEST (self-published, 2013, Zoe Quinn)
SUPERBETTER (self-published, 2014, Jane McGonigal)

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