

# Disability Dress in Video Games: Player Modding and Fashioning Disability Worlds in *The Sims 4*

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## Abstract

This article examines how Disabled players use “mods” to create disability dress representation in *The Sims 4*. We frame modding, user-generated alterations to game assets and mechanics, as digital fashion hacking that extends Disabled people’s longstanding practices of altering garments to enable access, express identity, and resist normative aesthetics. Using textual analysis of gameplay, paratextual materials, and player discourse, we analyze how disability dress mods operate within and against the game’s design. Drawing on Fritsch’s access as friction and Halberstam’s queer failure, we argue that glitches, misfits, and breakdowns are not obstacles to inclusion but generative sites of creativity, critique, and community. We identify three recurrent player practices – navigating friction, embracing failure, and cultivating community – through which Disabled players fashion identities, share assets, and build disability worlds. Our findings contribute to fashion studies by positioning assistive technologies such as canes, wheelchairs, and hearing aids as critical dress objects in digital spaces and by theorizing modding as disability-led fashion hacking.

**Keywords:** Assistive Technologies; Digital Fashion; Disability Representation; Fashion Hacking; Mobility Aids.

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## Introduction

Dress is a vital tool through which Disabled people construct their identities in an ableist world.<sup>1</sup> Yet the fashion industry continues to exclude them through multiple barriers, including limited aesthetic choices in the adaptive market and stereotypical media portrayals.<sup>2</sup> In response, Disabled people have hacked clothing to fit their bodies, express their identities, and claim space as fashioned subjects on their own terms.<sup>3</sup> This article extends these interventions into digital spaces by exploring how Disabled players express disability through dress in video games.

Much like the fashion industry in real life (IRL), video games have largely excluded Disabled players from meaningful representation of their bodies and dress aesthetics. In response, many players have turned to “modding,” a player-led practice of altering or customizing a game’s software, visuals, or mechanics to change gameplay, create new content, or improve accessibility. Through these collective acts of design activism, Disabled and other marginalized players expand possibilities for representation, self-fashioning, and community-building.<sup>4</sup>

To examine how Disabled players represent and enact disability through dress in video games, this article focuses on *The Sims 4*<sup>5</sup> as a case study. We ask: How do Disabled players create and use disability dress mods to intervene into the game’s built-in disability representation? We analyze how players use modding to introduce new forms of disability dress representation that the game itself does not offer. Drawing on Fritsch’s access as friction<sup>6</sup> and Halberstam’s queer failure,<sup>7</sup> we argue that while disability dress mods do not always function as intended, players use these moments of failure as openings for resistance and community-building. Our article contributes to fashion studies by positioning modding as a key site of disability-led fashion hacking that operates in parallel to similar practices IRL. While both forms of hacking advance disability inclusion through self-representation, the dress objects most frequently altered to express disability identity differ across digital and physical contexts.

We follow an anthropological perspective in fashion studies and define disability dress as any adornment or supplement to the body that enables players to represent disability and disability identity.<sup>8</sup> We focus on mobility and assistive aids — such as prosthetics, canes, and hearing aids — as forms of dress that are not purely utilitarian but integral to self-representation and identity expression. We recognize disability as expansive and complex, extending beyond medical, legal, or bureaucratic definitions.<sup>9</sup> For this article, we focus on disabilities that can be visibly represented through avatars’ bodies and/or assistive devices, such as mobility or sensory aids.

Before we begin, we heed the wisdom of disability studies scholars who call on researchers to identify their positionality. Some caution that non-Disabled scholars risk misinterpreting or misrepresenting

1. Ben Barry and Philippa Nesbitt, “Self-Fashioning Queer/Crip: Stretching and Grappling with Disability, Gender and Dress,” *Fashion, Style and Popular Culture*, Vol. 10, no. 10 (2022): 45–62; Ingun Grimstad Klepp and Mari Rysst, “Deviant Bodies and Suitable Clothes,” *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 21, no. 1 (2016): 79–99.
2. Ben Barry, “Disability Dress Wisdom and Accessible Fashion,” in *The Meanings of Dress*, 5th ed., ed. José Blanco F. (New York: Fairchild, 2024), 174–184.
3. Ben Barry, Philippa Nesbitt, Alexis De Villa, Kristina McMullin, and Jonathan Dumitra, “Re-Making Clothing, Re-Making Worlds: On Crip Fashion Hacking,” *Social Sciences*, Vol. 12, no. 9 (2023), 500.
4. Daniel Drak and Ben Barry, “Modding Masculinities: Video Game Glitches and Transcending Gendered Dress,” *Critical Studies in Men’s Fashion*, Vol. 10, no. 2 (December 2023): 197–215.
5. Maxis, *The Sims 4* (Redwood City, CA: Electronic Arts, 2014). The contemporary installment of *The Sims* franchise, first launched in 2000.
6. Kelly Fritsch, “Accessible Assemblages: Disability, Intercorporeality, and the Politics of Access,” *Critical Disability Discourses*, Vol. 7 (2016): 1–18.
7. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).
8. Brent Luvaas and Joanne B. Eicher, *The Anthropology of Dress and Fashion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019).
9. Mel Y. Chen, Alison Kafer, Eunjung Kim, and Julie Avril Minich, “Introduction,” in *Crip Genealogies*, eds. Mel Y. Chen, Alison Kafer, Eunjung Kim, and Julie Avril Minich (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 1–59.

Disabled experiences,<sup>10</sup> while others remind us that disability is neither binary nor singular, but a diverse experience shaped by intersecting identities and politics.<sup>11</sup> Recognizing these complexities, we approach this work from within disability experience: the first author as neurodivergent and the second as Disabled with low vision. We are also both white, queer, cisgender men who hold full-time faculty positions. We use this privilege to expose how the fashion industry oppresses Disabled people while centering the brilliance of their resistance.

## Background

### *The Sims 4*

We selected *The Sims 4* for this article because of its robust system of avatar body and dress customization and its history of encouraging user modifications, particularly among marginalized players seeking inclusive representation. Although other avatar-based games, such as *Second Life* and *Animal Crossing*, allow varying degrees of customization, *The Sims 4* uniquely encourages extensive modifications to both avatar identities and dress and supports their integration into the game. When players create a new character — a Sim — they customize its appearance, including clothing, hairstyles, accessories, and makeup. As the game progresses, players can continue to evolve their Sims' lives by purchasing new dress items and experimenting with new styles. Since its original release in 2000, *The Sims* series has produced multiple sequels, expanded across platforms, and introduced downloadable content that allows players to enhance their characters' wardrobes and environments.<sup>12</sup>

The game's fanbase, known as "Simmers," have expanded body and dress options through mods that address representational gaps. In some cases, the developers have officially integrated community creations that first appeared as mods. For example, while *The Sims 4* added top-surgery scars in 2023,<sup>13</sup> this representational gap had been addressed through mods by creators such as cloudysimmer as of 2019.<sup>14</sup> While gender diversity has improved in recent years, disability representation remains largely absent. This absence positions *The Sims 4* as an ideal site to examine modding and disability dress representation.

### Fashion/Dress, Disability, and Digital Worlds

Scholars in fashion, design, and disability studies increasingly consider mobility aids and assistive technologies as components of dress and personal style, not solely medical tools. Design historians argue that prosthetics, wheelchairs, and other aids should be understood as designed objects that shape the cultural meaning of disability.<sup>15</sup> They emphasize that these artifacts not only assist with movement or sensory needs but also participate in aesthetic self-presentation and the visual politics of disability identity.

Fashion scholars have shown that prosthetic limbs and assistive devices are being reimaged from medical devices into objects of pleasure and self-expression.<sup>16</sup> For example, Melkumova-Reynolds describes

10. Rob Kitchin, "The Researched Opinions on Research: Disabled People and Disability Research," *Disability & Society*, Vol. 15, no. 1 (1999): 25–47.

11. Kay Inckle, James Brighton, and Andrew C. Sparkes, "Who Is 'Us' in 'Nothing About Us Without Us'? Rethinking the Politics of Disability Research," *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 42, nos. 3–4 (2023), <https://dsq-sds.org/index.php/dsq/article/view/7947/7859>.

12. Drak and Barry, "Modding Masculinities."

13. James Factora, "Your Sims Can Now Have Binders, Top Surgery Scars, and More," *Them*, February 1, 2023, <https://www.them.us/story/sims-binders-top-surgery-scars-update>.

14. cloudysimmer, "Male Trans Scars," *Tumblr*, 2019, <https://cloudy-simmer.tumblr.com/post/184649464962/male-trans-scars>.

15. Bess Williamson and Elizabeth Guffey, eds., *Making Disability Modern: Design Histories* (London–New York: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020).

16. Laini Burton and Jana Melkumova-Reynolds, "'My Leg Is a Giant Stiletto Heel': Fashioning the Prosthetised Body," *Fashion Theory*, Vol. 23, no. 2 (2019): 195–218, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1567061>; Ben Barry, "How to Dress Well," in *Design & Disability: 10 Tales of Accessible Design*, ed. Natalie Kane (London: V&A Publishing, 2025), 110–119.

how Disabled models integrate canes and wheelchairs into their ensembles, turning these aids into deliberate fashion statements.<sup>17</sup> Using aids as aesthetics affirms disability as a creative and desirable identity rather than as one to be concealed or corrected. Extending this argument, Barry documents how contemporary Disabled designers and wearers transform hearing aids, canes, and wheelchairs into sites of aesthetic innovation, ableist resistance, and disability identity.<sup>18</sup> In this context, mobility aids are expressive dress objects through which Disabled people claim authorship, pleasure, and pride in how they fashion themselves. Together, these perspectives position assistive technologies as dress objects that shape how disability is represented. These insights inform our analysis of disability dress in video games, where assistive devices similarly function as critical tools of self-representation.

In video games, digital fashion has become a critical medium for identity construction because avatar customization allows players to experiment with various identities and aesthetics,<sup>19</sup> including ones that they may not be able to fully explore in their physical realities.<sup>20</sup> Digital fashion enables players to manage their virtual fashioned identities through what Gee terms the “projective stance,” in which they negotiate the relationships between their identity and avatar representation. Players project aspects of their identities, desires and values on their avatars, while also adjusting to the roles, constraints and affordances of the avatar’s design and the game world.<sup>21</sup> Projective stance plays a significant role for marginalized players whose physical fashion experiences are constrained by the fashion industry and societal norms. Where access to a variety of styles and self-representation may be limited IRL, digital fashion in video games can remove or mitigate physical, economic, and cultural barriers to self-fashioning and allow for identity expression and experimentation through the embodied affordances of their avatars.<sup>22</sup>

As technology has advanced, digital fashion has evolved from fixed character designs to increasingly customizable avatars. While games such as *The Sims* have gradually expanded player control over avatars’ dress and identities,<sup>23</sup> most games continue to restrict customization to developer-defined options that rarely include Disabled bodies. Video games have historically marginalized disability both in terms of accessibility and visual representation. Early “hero” characters were almost always non-Disabled, while Disabled characters appeared primarily as villains or as metaphors for tragedy and limitation.<sup>24</sup> Even today, disability representation remains rare: a 2022 Geena Davis Institute report found that only 0.1% of video game characters are shown with a disability,<sup>25</sup> and Shell reveals that fewer than 1% of major game trailers feature a Disabled protagonist.<sup>26</sup> While *The Sims 4* has expanded avatar customization, it continues to prioritize fashion diversity over bodily difference.

17. Jana Melkumova-Reynolds, “‘Let Me Be Your Stimy Toy’: Fashioning Disability, Crippling Fashion,” in *Dangerous Bodies: New Global Perspectives on Fashion and Transgression*, ed. J. Willson and R. Mahawatte (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 35–56, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06208-7\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06208-7_3).

18. Barry, “How to Dress Well,” 110–119.

19. Nicole Lamerichs, “Towards a Responsible Metaverse: Digital Fashion, Avatars, and the Promise of Identity in Virtual Worlds,” in *Digital Fashion: Theory, Practice, and Context*, eds. Sarah Gilligan and Alessandra Vaccari (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 335–348.

20. Francesco Sibilla and Tania Mancini, “I Am (Not) My Avatar: A Review of the User–Avatar Relationships in Massively Multiplayer Online Worlds,” *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, Vol. 12, no. 3 (2018), article 4, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5817/CP2018-3-4>.

21. James Paul Gee, “Video Games and Embodiment,” *Games and Culture*, Vol. 3, no. 3–4 (July 2008): 253–263, 258.

22. Drak and Barry, “Modding Masculinities,” 197–215.

23. Maxis, *The Sims* (Redwood City: Electronic Arts, 2000).

24. “Video Game Representation,” *New Mobility*, Teal Sherer. <https://newmobility.com/video-game-representation/>.

25. Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, *The Double-Edged Sword of Online Gaming: An Analysis of Masculinity in Video Games and the Gaming Community* (Los Angeles: Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2022), <https://geenadavisinstitute.org/research/the-double-edged-sword-of-online-gaming-an-analysis-of-masculinity-in-video-games-and-the-gaming-community/>.

26. Jethro Shell, “What Do We See: An Investigation Into the Representation of Disability in Video Games,” *arXiv preprint arXiv:2103.17100v1* (March 2021), <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2103.17100>.

## Video Games, Modding, and Disability

Modding — the player-led practice of editing a game’s code, design, or assets — has become a powerful tool for creative self-expression in video games. For many marginalized communities, mods expand possibilities for representation by allowing players to create avatars and environments that reflect their identities and styles. Modding also fosters community by bringing together players around shared identities in online spaces, where visible markers such as body type, clothing, and skin tone are central to connection and solidarity. When players share mods within their communities, gameplay transforms into communal acts. For example, Black Simmers developed mods to address the lack of darker skin tones in *The Sims 4* and shared them within their community, closing representational gaps and cultivating connection.<sup>27</sup>

Disabled players similarly engage in modding to represent disability in ways that mainstream games rarely allow. This practice continues a long history of Disabled people hacking everyday objects to increase access.<sup>28</sup> Such creative interventions demonstrate that Disabled people are “agents of remaking”, not passive recipients of design.<sup>29</sup> The mods developed by Disabled players range from visual updates of avatars and dress objects to complex gameplay modifications that expand accessibility and inclusion. Yet the inclusive potential of modding is limited by persistent accessibility barriers. Creating and installing mods requires technical knowledge that can exclude players with limited resources or digital literacy.<sup>30</sup> Van Ommen and Chaparro add that some Disabled gamers often face additional challenges, including difficulty perceiving crucial visuals or audio cues and navigating complex controllers.<sup>31</sup> These barriers create a double exclusion for Disabled players because they are excluded both from gameplay and from the opportunity to see themselves represented in it.<sup>32</sup>

## Theoretical Framework: Friction and Failure as Creative Openings

To understand these dynamics of exclusion and creative resistance, we draw upon a theoretical framework that foregrounds the tensions that arise when marginalized people misalign with existing systems. We theorize these misalignments by drawing on the work of Fritsch and Halberstam. Their scholarship demonstrates how the disruptions that Disabled and queer people encounter when their lives conflict with normative structures generate openings for new possibilities.

Hamraie and Fritsch describe Disabled people’s hacking of everyday products and spaces as a “site of political friction,”<sup>33</sup> building on Fritsch’s earlier work that frames access as a “kind of attack.”<sup>34</sup> In our analysis, we treat friction as the moment when a mod or assistive-dress item collides with the game’s built-in systems. For example, when a cane is categorized as a “ring” or clips through walls, these moments reveal the non-Disabled assumptions embedded in the code. For Fritsch and Hamraie, hacks are not merely about achieving access but also about exposing and contesting ableist norms. Fritsch

27. “Black ‘The Sims 4’ Players Are Changing One of the World’s Biggest Games,” *Vice*, Gita Jackson, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/black-the-sims-4-players-are-changing-one-of-the-worlds-biggest-games/>.

28. Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, “Crip Technoscience Manifesto,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*, Vol. 5 (2019), 1–34; Bess Williamson, *Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

29. Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, “Crip Technoscience Manifesto,” 7.

30. Hector Postigo, “Of Mods and Modders: Chasing Down the Value of Fan-Based Digital Game Modifications,” *Games and Culture*, Vol. 2, no. 4 (October 2007): 300–313.

31. Carmen A. Van Ommen and Barbara S. Chaparro, “Exploring Video Game Satisfaction of Gamers with Disabilities,” in *Universal Access in Human-Computer Interaction: Novel Design Approaches and Technologies*, ed. Margherita Antona and Constantine Stephanidis (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 392–405, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-05028-2\\_26](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-05028-2_26).

32. Katie Ellis, Tama Leaver, and Mike Kent, “Introduction: Gaming (and) Disability,” in *Gaming Disability: Disability Perspectives on Contemporary Video Games*, eds. Katie Ellis, Tama Leaver, and Mike Kent (London: Routledge, 2023), 23.

33. Hamraie and Fritsch, “Crip Technoscience Manifesto”.

34. Fritsch, “Accessible Assemblages,” 23.

argues, “access is not simply a technical problem to be solved... but rather a starting point from which we can consider how disability is both excluded and included.”<sup>35</sup> In video games, frictions that arise when players use disability dress mods can similarly open up new possibilities for representation. When wheelchair mods fail to integrate smoothly or assistive devices behave unpredictably, these moments of friction both expose the game’s underlying ableist structures and generate openings for alternative representations and community-building. Frictions also reveal what Halberstam calls “queer failure” that reframes breakdowns as openings for creativity and joy in the face of limiting systems.<sup>36</sup>

We use friction and failure as analytic lenses to identify moments when disability dress mods glitch, “misfit,”<sup>37</sup> or break down. For example, we consider mod glitches — when a mod behaves unpredictably — as queer failures that open playful possibilities. Rather than serving as obstacles to inclusion, these disruptions create openings for creativity, critique, and community. Across our analysis, we regard friction as a practice of resistance and failure as a practice of joy. These practices reflect Hamraie and Fritsch’s recognition that Disabled people “are not merely formed or acted on by the world — we are engaged agents of remaking.”<sup>38</sup>

## Methodology

### Textual Analysis

Our analysis treats *The Sims 4* as a cultural text, consisting of a designed system of visuals, rules, and interactions that can be read much like a film or dress. Following Fernández-Vara, textual analysis situates games within their contexts of production, play and interpretation to uncover how they generate meaning.<sup>39</sup> We employ her three-stage model (combining contextual, formal and interpretive analysis) to examine how disability dress representations are communicated through the architecture and player modifications of *The Sims 4*. Fernández-Vara notes, “the text is not limited to the work itself, but also to where the text is interpreted and by whom.”<sup>40</sup> While we endeavour to understand the breadth of disability dress representation and modding communities, we also recognize our understanding of mods and their meaning is shaped by our positionalities as researchers and players.

We derived data from two primary sources: gameplay observations and community online discourse (i.e., via Reddit and Tumblr). Our gameplay analysis is grounded in an autoethnographic approach to finding, implementing and playing with disability dress mods, thereby situating us within the research to interpret how disability dress and modding practices unfold during play. Over a two-month period, the first author conducted approximately 30 hours of gameplay within *The Sims 4*, recording observations through field notes, screenshots, and in-game video recordings. Popular disability mods were selected through keyword searches (“Sims 4”, “disability”, “wheelchair”, “mods”, etc.). Each mod was installed individually, tested, and observed for function, aesthetic, and representational behavior. Gameplay documentation emphasized moments of friction (bugs, clipping) and failure (glitches, omissions) as potential sites of meaning, aligning with our theoretical framework. We focused on the free-to-play base game (excluding paid expansion packs) and on freely available mods to maintain consistency with economically accessible play conditions. In addition, we analyzed 16 Reddit threads and six Tumblr mod repositories between November 2024 and February 2025. Original posts and comments were treated as qualitative sources and reviewed to capture modding practices and responses from players.

35. Fritsch, “Accessible Assemblages,” 26.

36. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3.

37. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept,” *Hypatia*, Vol. 26, no. 3 (Summer 2011): 591–609, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23016570>.

38. Hamraie and Fritsch, “Crip Technoscience Manifesto”, 7.

39. Clara Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019).

40. Fernández-Vara, *Introduction to Game Analysis*, 2nd ed., 6.



We identified patterns through thematic coding by combining inductive pattern recognition with deductive categories informed by our theoretical framework. Autoethnographic materials from gameplay and community discourses were analyzed alongside paratextual materials, such as developer communications and media articles. The latter were treated as secondary data and used to provide contextual background that informed our emerging insights. During analysis, we examined how friction reveals design constraints and how failure opens unexpected possibilities. We then refined these observations into three themes — navigating friction, embracing failure, and cultivating community — that interpret these dynamics as expressions of resistance, joy, and connection among players when creating and using disability dress mods.

## Results

Our findings are organized into three themes of player practice: Navigating Friction, Embracing Failure, and Cultivating Community. These themes illustrate how Disabled players engage with the game's technical limits to create and enact disability dress mods, and the outcomes that emerge from these practices.

### Navigating Friction: Acts of Resistance

While *The Sims 4* has gradually incorporated some disability representation into the base game (such as hearing aids added in 2023),<sup>41</sup> options for disability remain limited. Beate Ochsner notes, “gamers identifying as [D]isabled still have no choice but to look for their own solutions to potential barriers in games.”<sup>42</sup> Our gameplay observations highlight that this remains the case for many Disabled Sims players, requiring the individual labor of modding to hack their own representations.

Before playing with mods in *The Sims 4*, players must navigate the process of finding and implementing disability mods. Websites with disability mods often have unclear, occasionally risky interfaces. During our gameplay analysis, we found that many disability mods are hosted on websites like MediaFire that, while important in enabling file sharing, present security risks through misleading download buttons and pop-ups. In addition, players must become familiar with how to implement mods into the game. While guides exist online to instruct players, the process can be cumbersome.

Disability mods often defy an intuitive categorization within the game's structure. Our gameplay analysis demonstrated that some, such as a white cane by karzalee,<sup>43</sup> are categorized as “rings.” This is understandable from a coding perspective, as the cane builds from a ring asset within the game's design, but it can be counterintuitive for players. Similarly, necrodog's *Animated Basegame Rideable Wheelchair Vehicle* — one of the few functioning wheelchair mods available — is classified as an “outdoor activity object.”<sup>44</sup> Wheelchairs therefore cannot be added during Create-A-Sim (the feature used to design Sims before gameplay) but instead appear as in-game purchasable objects, due to how the mod is coded. While this is documented in the mod's description, it is easy to forget this categorization while playing, making implementation less intuitive. The absence of wheelchairs in the official game is often explained by the complexity of adding new animation sets, which would require a separate system to enable seamless wheelchair use. In response, necrodog leveraged the animation and logic from an existing bike asset to create a wheelchair that moves within the limits of the game's architecture. This workaround results in failures — Sims attempt to mount the wheelchair as if it were a bike and automatically equip a helmet — but these unanticipated moments become part of the mod's charm. The result is both a testament to how modders reengineer existing tools to make accessibility possible and an example of how friction

41. Factora, “Your Sims Can Now Have Binders.”

42. Beate Ochsner, “Providing Access,” in *Disability and Video Games*, eds. Markus Spöhrer and Beate Ochsner (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 298, DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-34374-2\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-34374-2_11).

43. karzalee, “White Cane,” *Studio K Creation*, April 5, 2017, <https://karzalee.wixsite.com/studiok/post/2017/04/05/white-cane>.

44. necrodog, “Animated Basegame Rideable Wheelchair Vehicle,” *Tumblr*, December 13, 2019, <https://necrodogmtsands4s.tumblr.com/post/189614004275/animated-basegame-rideable-wheelchair-vehicle>.

can generate delight. In this example the mod does not function like an IRL wheelchair, yet its playful imperfections capture the joyful and improvisational spirit of modding itself.



Figure 1: Screenshot from *The Sims 4* using the “Animated Basegame Rideable Wheelchair Vehicle” mod by necrodog. The image depicts a Sim navigating an outdoor path in a customized wheelchair, demonstrating how modders reconfigure existing game assets to introduce disability-inclusive mobility options. Here, resistance to ableist design is expressed through creative adaptation, turning an inaccessible system into one of movement and joy. Because the wheelchair mod repurposes an in-game bicycle object, Sims automatically wear helmets while using it—an unintended yet revealing trace of how accessibility must often be coded through workaround.

Screenshot captured and used by Daniel Drak for educational and scholarly purposes.

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This friction also extends to basic gameplay functions. In *The Sims 4*, players can select a different outfit for their Sims depending on the weather, occasion, activity, etc. However, when hearing aids are tied to a specific outfit, they are not automatically carried over into other outfits. Players note frustration with having to manually add aids such as hearing aids to each outfit, as one player explains: “... it just makes sense for these items to be a part of our Sims’ everyday lives.”<sup>45</sup> The structural limitations of the game, as determined by the game’s developers, create additional friction points. Players also note that because disability was never integrated into the original code and design of *The Sims 4*, adding it retroactively through mods becomes a very difficult feat.<sup>46</sup>

These experiences show how Sims players navigate a game that was not designed with disability in mind. This is not necessarily a straightforward process, and so we note the extra labor required to implement them, never mind the sophisticated know-how required to actually produce mods themselves. Across these examples, players demonstrate how they encounter and work through friction at various stages, from locating safe downloads to troubleshooting the game’s restrictive object categories. This reveals the everyday labor required to make disability visible in *The Sims 4*, demonstrating how modding becomes a political act, a refusal to wait for institutional inclusion.

45. MuirDragonne, “Calling all Simmers who create characters with disabilities!,” *Reddit*, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Sims4/comments/18z557t/calling\\_all\\_simmers\\_who\\_create\\_characters\\_with/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Sims4/comments/18z557t/calling_all_simmers_who_create_characters_with/).

46. WhenSheepFly, “Why can’t we have wheelchairs in the Sims?,” *Reddit*, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Sims4/comments/1e9yr31/why\\_cant\\_we\\_have\\_wheelchairs\\_in\\_the\\_sims/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Sims4/comments/1e9yr31/why_cant_we_have_wheelchairs_in_the_sims/).



## Embracing Failure: Joyful Glitches

Even when disability dress mods are successfully implemented into *The Sims*, they often do not function as intended. They then “fail” within the game’s normative mechanics, leading to unexpected gameplay experiences. For example, the wheelchair mod we explored in our gameplay could not be used inside the Sim’s house, limiting its use. Other failures manifested in mods such as the walking cane mod. As the mod affixes a cane to the Sim’s hand, it will often clip through parts of the Sim’s body or other Sims and objects as the character moves around.



Figure 2: Screenshot from *The Sims 4* featuring the “White Cane” mod by karzalee (Studio K). The scene portrays two Sims dancing together in a domestic space—one holding a cane mod used as a mobility aid, the other moving freely within the same environment. The moment visualizes how fashion, assistive technology, and intimacy intersect in player-created worlds, transforming disability representation into an aesthetic and relational act. The cane passes imperfectly through the Sim’s body, revealing how glitches and limitations become part of the expressive vocabulary of digital self-fashioning.

Screenshot captured and used by Daniel Drak for educational and scholarly purposes.

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By conventional expectations in gaming, this kind of limitation of a device is a clear “failure.” When disability mods “fail,” they not only illuminate the ableist assumptions embedded in the game’s design, but they also create unexpected gameplay and delight, reflecting crip joy that interrupts expectations of perfection. Players reflect on these failures with both frustration and humor where glitches become funny stories or creative moments within their play sessions.

We found that Disabled players can embrace this failure as an element of their gameplay experience, while simultaneously advocating for more, seamless integration into the game.

I wish we had prosthetics, especially since it doesn’t seem like it would be too big of a task to include them unlike wheelchairs, which is also another option I wish we had but know that it’d likely be unfeasible to include. In general, amputation is probably the disability I include the most with my character designs and not being able to include that when making the characters in Sims is just off.<sup>47</sup>

47. Comment by RosenRanAway on MuirDragonne, “Calling All Simmers Who Create Characters with Disabilities!,” Reddit, March 2024, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Sims4/comments/18z557t/calling\\_all\\_simmers\\_who\\_create\\_characters\\_with/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Sims4/comments/18z557t/calling_all_simmers_who_create_characters_with/).

This player illustrates the tensions between aspiration and practicality. Players desired fuller representation but understand the technical limits of the system.

Instead of maintaining that such limitations are purely negative, Disabled players often persist in how they reimagine, adapt and find joy in unexpected outcomes. In our own gameplay analysis, we noted that even when mods failed, such as a cane waving around a Sim mid-celebration or a Sim racing very quickly in their wheelchairs due to their bike coding were exciting. These moments of levity reveal how players reframe technical imperfections as opportunities for creativity and self-expression. In navigating these failures, players sometimes turned frustration into improvisation, extending individual adaptation into collective exchange. By disrupting the success narrative of smooth gameplay, failures become a way for players to embrace a form of representation, while also “refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline.”<sup>48</sup> In embracing imperfections, Disabled players recontextualize technical limitations as opportunities for creative and joyful resistance of normative gameplay.

### Cultivating Community: Collective World-Building

An important takeaway of our research is that navigating friction and embracing failure in disability representation in games is a shared experience and has helped cultivate vibrant communities of disabled Sims players. Information exchanges in Reddit threads and modding resources on Tumblr provide spaces (and communities) where players can share advice, troubleshoot problems, and come together to celebrate creative solutions. Ginsburg and Rapp develop the concept of “disability worlds” to describe how Disabled people enact everyday creativity to cultivate community “despite enduring ableism that pathologizes people with disabilities as marginalized or ‘suffering subjects,’”<sup>49</sup> such as by creating disability arts nights or sharing strategies to navigate secondary education. The friction and failure that players encounter when implementing disability dress mods lead them to cultivate community and build worlds. Through online spaces, they come together to discuss ideas, seek help and share solutions, and share their experiences and insights.

Ochsner notes how video games, both in terms of gameplay and their extended experiences beyond the game, can foster communities and combat social isolation.<sup>50</sup> These observations align with our findings of active player discussions on Reddit and Tumblr. These communities become spaces where players can act in solidarity with one another, validating their individual and collective experiences while developing a sense of critical consciousness. World-building in this sense provides emotional infrastructure where joy can be sustained despite frustration during gameplay.

I hate that people assume that people with disabilities are in a state of constant misery and as such, aren’t allowed to experience proper representation of themselves even when it comes to escapism. Like, we’re only allowed to exist in two states to these people: doom and gloom or inspiration porn. We’re not allowed to be actual human beings.<sup>51</sup>

This player illuminates how, beyond facilitating mod sharing, Disabled player communities become sites of rich critique of society and ableist structures, highlighting collective frustration with limited representations of disability in gaming culture. Exclusion here becomes an impetus for solidarity, evolving individual frustrations into collective resistance. Importantly, many Disabled players also exercise caution when calling for fuller representation by noting concerns about what that implementation may result in:

There’s no limit on the amount of skeezy things gamers will do in games and if they add wheelchairs and mobility disabilities to the game or if they add invisible illnesses like autism or [Down syndrome] to the game it will lead to all sorts of nightmare scenarios such as

48. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88.

49. Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, *Disability Worlds* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2024), 5.

50. Beate Ochsner, “Providing Access.”

51. rarestereocats, “Disability representation in The Sims,” Reddit, [https://www.reddit.com/r/thesims/comments/pvd9uj/disability\\_representation\\_in\\_the\\_sims/](https://www.reddit.com/r/thesims/comments/pvd9uj/disability_representation_in_the_sims/)

‘locking my wheelchair-bound Sim in a house with only stairs till they starve’ or people intentionally neglecting child Sims that have disabilities because they don’t want a disabled child Sim.<sup>52</sup>

This player highlights how the incorporation of disability in games like *The Sims 4* is not neutral, but instead it reflects pre-existing societal biases. These concerns reveal that representation itself carries risk, and players are aware that inclusion can reproduce harm if implemented without care.

## Discussion

While modding expands the possibilities for representing disability, we find that it also produces moments of friction and failure that challenge normative gameplay structures and expectations. Our results suggest that modding’s significance for disability dress representation lies less in technical precision than in how it fosters resistance, creates joy, and cultivates world-building. We find these tensions generate opportunities to reimagine what counts as disability dress representation, resist normative beauty standards, and foster collective creativity. As Hamraie and Fritsch argue, Disabled people’s everyday hacking enacts “refusal and critique, but also joy and world-building.”<sup>53</sup> While some game designers may perceive friction and failure as technical problems to be resolved, our findings suggest that such disruptions are productive elements. Chandler and Ignagni argue that embracing disability requires recognizing its “disruptive potential,” in which “disability [is] desired in a way that disrupt[s] this space and the relations that ordered it.”<sup>54</sup> In *The Sims 4*, these disruptions open up spaces for players to imagine Disabled ways of dressing and being outside of non-Disabled norms.

Our findings extend research in fashion studies that highlights the role of mobility aid and assistive devices as dress objects that can creatively express Disabled people’s identities. While past scholarship has examined these technologies as dress in the context of Disabled fashion models and artists<sup>55</sup> and independent Disabled designers,<sup>56</sup> these artifacts are often medicalized and stripped of fashionable aesthetics IRL. The dominant association between mobility aids and medicalization has long reinforced stigma and constrained aesthetic possibility. However, research on user reviews of assistive technologies found that Disabled users frequently commented on their aesthetic and visual qualities, and emphasized a desire for greater stylistic choice.<sup>57</sup> Such reflections underscore how Disabled people envision assistive devices as expressive tools, highlighting the need for greater design innovation to support self-styling and identity expression. Reframing these artifacts not as medical instruments but as designed dress objects, what Guffey and Williamson call the “design model of disability,”<sup>58</sup> reveals how assistive devices in video games already play a particularly important role in fostering a cultural shift. By representing aids as adornment, video games help to destigmatize assistive wearables and reimagine disability as aesthetic, expressive, and integral to fashion systems.

Mobility aids and assistive devices play a distinctive role in the construction of identity within video games. In these digital contexts, canes, wheelchairs, and other assistive devices do not facilitate movement or sensory experience — and may even impede it — unlike their critical functional role IRL.

52. Strifecaster, “Sims 4: Disability Representation Is Not Optional, EA,” Reddit, [https://www.reddit.com/r/Sims4/comments/uwd115/sims\\_4\\_disability\\_representation\\_is\\_not\\_optional/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Sims4/comments/uwd115/sims_4_disability_representation_is_not_optional/)

53. Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, “Crip Technoscience Manifesto,” 2.

54. Eliza Chandler and Esther Ignagni, “Strange Beauty: Aesthetic Possibilities for Desiring Disability into the Future,” in *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Disability: Looking Towards the Future*, eds. Katie Ellis, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Mike Kent, and Rachel Robertson (London: Routledge, 2018): 255–265, 258.

55. Melkumova-Reynolds, “‘Let Me Be Your Stimy Toy.’”

56. Barry, “How to Dress Well.”

57. Kate Nartker, Kate Annett-Hitchcock, and S. M. Azizul Hoque, “Consumer Perceptions and Concerns Regarding Aesthetic Attributes of Textile-Based Assistive Devices: A Qualitative Analysis of Online Retail Product Reviews,” *Research Journal of Textile and Apparel*, Vol. 28, no. 3 (July 16, 2024): 365–78, <https://doi.org/10.1108/RJTA-01-2022-0005>.

58. Williamson and Guffey, *Making Disability Modern*.

However, while Disabled people often seek assistive devices that enable identity expression IRL, users frequently cannot hack and personalize these items because of their technical complexity. As a result, many are forced to depend on the limited customization options controlled by manufacturers. In contrast, modding assistive devices in *The Sims 4* presents far fewer barriers, as both the base game and most mods are freely accessible, allowing players to experiment with design and representation. This prominence of assistive devices as dress in video games is significant for fashion studies. While much disability-focused fashion research has studied adaptive clothing and its aesthetic expansion,<sup>59</sup> our findings suggest that digital contexts invite a parallel, yet distinct, form of creative expression through assistive technologies. These objects acquire unique significance as dress in video games because their purely representational role and the low barriers to customization enhance their capacity to express identity and aesthetic creativity.

Our findings also demonstrate how fashion hacking functions as an activist practice through which Disabled people create access to both IRL and digital fashion, whether by remaking garments for their own bodies or modding disability dress for their Sims. In physical contexts, Disabled people's fashion hacking embraces the disruptions of Disabled embodiment by incorporating body asymmetries and divergent bodily rhythms into the silhouettes and materials of garments.<sup>60</sup> Rather than being treated as problems for designers to solve, these disruptions illuminate the creative potential that disability brings into fashion design. Similarly, Disabled gamers leverage the disruptions generated by disability dress mods as openings to challenge normative assumptions about disability. We suggest that modding represents a form of digital fashion hacking that intentionally invites disruption as a strategy to question, resist, and reimagine disability dress representation in video games. By framing modding as a form of fashion hacking, our analysis extends this activist fashion methodology into virtual spaces, foregrounds disability-led design in digital fashion, and positions Disabled players as creators of alternative digital fashion futures.

Whether IRL or in video games, advancing disability inclusion in fashion requires more than increasing representation; it demands that Disabled people design these representations. *The Sims 4*, while not perfect, enables user-generated content that allows Disabled players to author their own dress representations. Yet this inclusion often relies on the unpaid labor of Disabled designers, mirroring inequitable power structures in adaptive fashion where Disabled people are positioned as "users" or "testers" rather than co-designers. As Jackson and Williams argue, such extractive practices constitute "knowledge extraction" where Disabled people's design insights are appropriated and sold back as innovation.<sup>61</sup> Although *The Sims 4* has expanded dress options and incorporated user-generated content, such as removing gendered clothing restrictions in 2016 and collaborating with select creators in expansion packs, the financial terms of these partnerships remain unclear.<sup>62</sup> Without transparency or equitable compensation, these collaborations risk replicating the exploitative dynamics in the adaptive fashion industry. Until the game more fully integrates disability dress mods and compensates Disabled creators, representation in *The Sims 4* will remain largely user-generated and dependent on the unpaid digital fashion labor of Disabled players.

## Conclusion

This article offers an initial exploration of disability dress modding through textual analysis of *The Sims 4*, but it is limited by its focus on a single game, its primary emphasis on disability rather than intersecting forms of identity, and its reliance on textual representation rather than lived or embodied experience. Because *The Sims 4* uniquely supports open modding, future research could compare its player-driven

59. Ben Barry et al., "Re-Making Clothing, Re-Making Worlds."

60. Ben Barry et al., "Re-Making Clothing, Re-Making Worlds."

61. Liz Jackson and Rua Williams, "The Fashion Empire Built on Stolen Ideas," *The New Republic*, November 12, 2023, <https://newrepublic.com/article/176381/runway-dreams-fashion-empire-stolen-ideas>.

62. Drak and Barry, "Modding Masculinities."

design culture with platforms such as *Fortnite* or *Roblox*. In these games, players “shop” for looks from designer collaborations and ready-made outfits, reflecting the logic of mainstream fashion retail.

Scholars might also explore how embodiment through virtual reality — using headsets and motion-based play — shapes the sensory and affective experience of dressing and inhabiting Disabled avatars. These immersive forms of gameplay reveal how fashion operates not only as visual style but also as a “situated bodily practice” that shapes how disability feels and is felt in virtual space, expanding fashion studies’ understanding of how dress mediates movement, touch, and self-perception across both IRL and digital worlds. Finally, qualitative interviews with Disabled gamers and modders would deepen understanding of how they navigate friction and failure, and how they experience mobility and sensory aids as dress and representation. Such research could also attend to the labor involved in creating these mods, and how experiences of disability intersect with race, gender, class, and sexuality to shape practices of design, play, and representation. These future studies could expand fashion scholarship by recognizing video games as central sites of disability expression, authorship, and world-making through dress.

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