

Desire, Enjoyment and Lack: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Computer Games

This paper draws on Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to explore the concept of the subject as represented in computer games. Building on the work of critics such as Bob Rehak who first introduced the concept of a Lacanian-inflected reading of video games in his article entitled 'Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar' anthologised in *The Videogame Theory Reader* (2003) and André Nusselder's book *Interface Fantasy: A Lacanian Cyborg Ontology*, published in 2009, I propose to examine the complex relationship between subjectivity, desire, fantasy and virtuality. In my paper I ask two questions. On the one hand, what can Lacanian psychoanalysis tell us about video games as systems of desire? On the other hand, what can video games tell us about the subject and the ways in which they are situated in the 'real world'?

Firstly it is important to establish that computer games are a significant cultural phenomenon. In the twelve months to the end of September 2009, £1.73 billion was spent on video games, according to the data company GFK Chart-Track. According to the UK Film Council exactly £1 billion was spent at the British box office during the same period, with a further £198 million spent on film titles released on DVD and Blu-ray. This means that £500 million more was spent on video games than on films over that 12 month period. As Harry Wallop writing for *The Telegraph* states, 'This is the clearest evidence yet that the video games market has come of age and transformed itself from a niche form of entertainment for teenage boys into a mainstream form of entertainment for millions of British families.' This rapid growth and movement into the mainstream can be attributed to a variety of innovations and developments in hardware. The previous decade has witnessed the rise of mobile phones as legitimate platforms for games, Apple has become increasingly involved in the video game market through the development of the app store for the iPhone and iPad and Nintendo has developed innovative control methods for the Wii console and DS handheld. In addition, Harmonix's *Guitar Hero* series, which utilises a variety of peripheral controllers, has seen the rapid uptake of music games which have simultaneously courted a wider market and helped bridge the gap between the video game and music industries. Finally, we have seen the rapid uptake of gaming on social network sites such as Facebook and Bebo. Video games have entered into the mainstream appealing to previously untapped markets such as mothers, children, and women rather than just the traditional demographic of men aged 18-25. Consequently, we are left with the question: What is it that makes video games so compelling? The buoyancy of the video game market compared to that of film cannot be entirely ascribed to perceived value, that is, the idea that a video game offers hours of entertainment and replay value whereas a film offers only two or three. Video games are compelling because their virtual worlds create structures of desire tailor-made for the player. In this paper, I argue that video games replicate the structures of desire which guide everyday experience. The act of play within virtual worlds parallels the subject's immersion in reality, understood in the wake of post-structuralist thought to be mediated through and by language. As such it is useful to draw on Lacanian psychoanalysis in order to explore the ways in which video games immerse the subject in an alternate 'reality'. In return, the analysis of video games indicates the ways in which the subject is immersed within language, culture and society.

Psychoanalysis and Desire: Pac-Man to Pong

Since its inception, psychoanalysis has conceptualised play in childhood in relation to the structures of desire witnessed in adulthood. In 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), Freud observes that games played by children are often characterised by the binary between absence and presence. He comments on a game he dubs 'Fort-da' played by his nephew:

'The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it... What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive "o-o-o-o." ["gone"] He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful "*da*" ["there"].' (143)

Freud speculated that through this game, the infant simulated the absence and presence of his mother. The game was an empowering tool for the infant because he was able to assert his agency, thereby sublimating the anxiety and loss felt by his mother's absence. The wooden reel was employed as a substitute for the lost and desired mother and the child deployed language in order to exert symbolic mastery over a situation otherwise beyond his control.

In 'Playing at Being', Bob Rehak also draws on this passage in order to make a connection between the repetitive nature of the 'Fort-da' game and the repetition which he argues is central to the structure and dynamic of nearly all computer games. Rehak is referring here to the recurrence of death and fail states in video games which have the effect of temporarily disconnecting players from the virtual world. Building on this insight, I argue that repetition is crucial to an understanding of the ways in which the subject perceives reality and expresses their desire. The two terms 'fort' and 'da' or 'gone' and 'here' are interdependent insofar as the mother can only be understood to be present by the very possibility of her absence and vice versa. For the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, this binary system of absence and presence constitutes the basis for our understanding of reality. Indeed, this system presents, 'the simplest symbolic sequence, a linear series of signs connoting the alternative, absence and presence.' (Lacan 141) For Lacan, this alternation of absence and presence forms the constitutive base of the Symbolic order, that is, language, and the entire realm of culture conceived as a symbol system structured on the model of language. The Symbolic order structures our understanding of reality and inaugurates desire. Indeed, the 'fort-da' game can be understood as the moment when the child first enters into the circuits of language and desire. Although the child is using symbols to ostensibly exert mastery over the mother's absence, he is also constitutively alienated and subordinated within the order of discourse. By simulating his desire, the child is simultaneously enveloped in language and barred from direct access to the external world. For Lacan, language inscribes a 'fundamentally alienating relationship in which man's being is dialectically constituted.' (115) In short, language produces a relationship between the subject and the world which simultaneously alienates the subject from unmediated access to the world. This 'alienating identification' with the world forms the basis of Lacan's theory of desire in which the subject repeatedly strives to regain direct contact with reality. It should be noted that in all likelihood an unmediated relation such as this is impossible. Instead, the subject enters into a shifting chain of desire which can never be fulfilled.

It is my contention that computer games tend to operate under the same principle of absence and presence deployed in the 'Fort-da' game. By giving the player agency within a strictly determined playing field, computer games sublimate the lack experienced by the subject. In other words, the player is simultaneously empowered and alienated within the

virtual world as they are impelled to negotiate a series of obstacles in pursuit of their desire. At this stage, it is useful to draw on Lacan's concept of the *objet petit a*. Roughly glossed as the object-cause of desire, this is the remainder produced when the subject enters into language and the hypothetical unity between the subject and reality breaks down. Through the pursuit of the *objet petit a*, the subject is able to maintain the fantasy that unity can be achieved, thereby sustaining the subject's illusion of wholeness. Indeed, Lacan's matheme of fantasy and desire is $\$ \langle \rangle a$. This should be read as the barred (or lacking) subject is directly correlative to the object-cause of desire. In other words, the subject is able to maintain the fantasy that they exist as an autonomous stable ego, with all of this phrase's connotations of wholeness, completeness, being and fulfilment, when in pursuit of the object of their desire. For Lacan, the subject is a subject of lack who exists under the illusion that they can become whole by attaining their desire. This dialectical structure of wholeness and lack is demonstrated by *Pac-Man* (1980). The eponymous character is a circle with a segment removed which functions as a mouth. This should be interpreted as the perfect shape which symbolises wholeness with an absence signifying lack. It is apt that the lack functions as the object of consumption, or the mouth. Progression from one level to the next is determined by Pac-Man's consumption of the dots which litter the maze. The dots signify the object as well as the cause of Pac-Man's desire. Pac-Man is a subject of lack who desires the dots because they appear as the missing object which will fill in his lack. In this way, *Pac-Man* can be understood as an expression of the dynamics evinced in Freud's reading of the 'Fort-da' game.

The levels of *Pac Man* continue in a repetitive loop until the 256th level. At this point an error in the coding causes the right hand side of the screen to display an unintelligible series of code. This can be read as an irruption of the 'truth' of desire into symbolic reality. Binary code, like the Symbolic order, is a series of ones and zeroes or absences and presences. The 'error' in the code is an intrusion which exposes and disrupts the structures of signification and desire. The basic alternation between absence and presence can also be seen in *Pong* (1972) in which the dot which moves between the two rackets can be understood as the object of desire fluctuating between the two players but never fully possessed. Frequently, the pleasure in *Pong* is derived not from achieving a high score over your opponent but in building up a rally of increasing speed; this can be otherwise understood as the subject taking enjoyment in the tempo of absence and presence.

Empowerment and Desire: Bayonetta, Riddick and the Force Unleashed

As we have seen, examples such as *Pac-Man* and *Pong* replicate the structures of desire which maintain the illusion that the ego is an autonomous whole. However, they also raise the question: If computer games offer virtual worlds in which anything is possible, why do they frequently impose heavy restrictions on the player? In order to understand this it useful to examine three more recent games which (dis)empower the player in a variety of different ways. *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed* (2008) offers the player a vast array of weapons, powers and abilities with which to unleash destruction on their enemies. By contrast, *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* (2004) is a first person shooter which denies players many of the tools and weapons they would traditionally possess. Although Riddick is a capable protagonist, for much of the game he is unarmed or equipped with only a shiv (slang for an improvised bladed weapon) making him extremely vulnerable when faced with enemies equipped with weapons such as knives or guns. Finally, *Bayonetta* (2010) provides the player with a huge array of moves, weapons and most importantly, the opportunity for

self-expression through creative use of the toolset and environment, but confines them to a linear narrative which directs play through a series of self-contained locations surrounded by invisible walls.

Star Wars: The Force Unleashed was universally denigrated upon release because it empowered the player to such an extent that the game offered little challenge. As the video game magazine Edge asked at the time of release: ‘If you take a player to the extremes of in-game power, giving them the equivalent of a god mode against standard enemies, how can that be turned into something more engaging than a temporary plaything?’ (90). Lacan’s formulation of desire can offer us some insight into this question. According to Lacan, one of the most traumatic experiences is for the subject to attain their desire. This seemingly paradoxical statement indicates that to remain as a desiring subject and therefore within the boundaries of socio-symbolic reality, the individual must maintain the illusion that satisfaction, unity and wholeness can be attained. If the subject attains the object which should herald satisfaction they are in danger of being thrown out of the circuits of desire. Consequently, the denial or deferral of satisfaction can be seen to sustain the illusion that satisfaction exists somewhere but is temporarily prohibited. This dynamic is used to good effect by the *Riddick* games. The eponymous player-character is frequently left without the weapons and equipment players have come to expect from the genre. The game’s structure and pacing is predicated less on its narrative and more on a sense of increasing empowerment as Riddick moves from unarmed combat to hand-to-hand weapons to gunplay. On occasion Riddick is granted access to military hardware in the form of mechs and tanks which operate as a violent release from the constraints of stealth play. These currents of increasing empowerment are off-set by a series of incidents in which Riddick is stripped of his inventory and forced to start the chain of increasing empowerment once more. This is a technique which was first seen in the original *Half Life* (1998) in which mid-way through the game the player is captured by the opposing forces and must regain their inventory and weapon set. This structure simultaneously empowers and restricts the player so that they are always induced to pursue their desire for more powerful weaponry and control, but refuses to allow them complete mastery over the game world. Consequently, desire is sustained but satisfaction or wholeness is denied. Indeed, this structure can be witnessed in the *Metroid* series. At the start of each entry, the protagonist, Samus Arran, is stripped of her weapons and toolset and the player must enter into the progressive circuit of desire to reclaim her lost unity.

My third example of the double bind between empowerment and disempowerment is *Bayonetta* in which the player is given an extremely powerful and varied moveset which enables them to engage in creative ways with enemies and the environment. However, the player is continuously restricted by the linear narrative, invisible walls and the imposition of quick time events which can induce an immediate fail state. For the unskilled player, death or defeat is a frequent occurrence which necessitates a return to the menu system and a brief loading screen. In this respect the dynamic experienced by the player between creative empowerment and a series of fail states mirrors the repetition of absence and presence embedded within the structure of desire. As such, this dynamic or tension is indicative of the compelling nature of computer games. Further to this, I argue that the structure of virtual worlds constructed within many computer games is analogous to the structure of consumer society. Consequently, computer games can be seen to be cultural artefacts which offer an ideological support to consumer society by interpellating the player as a consumer. In *The Consumer Society*, Jean Baudrillard states: ‘The consumer experiences his distinctive behaviours as freedom, as aspiration, as choice. His experience is not one of being *forced to be different*, of obeying a code.’ (61) Baudrillard means code in the sense of the rules of

conduct but it is tempting to read this in terms of binary code. Read in this light, virtual worlds can be seen to offer the player the experience of freedom and choice, but ultimately bind them to the code or rule-set written by the developers. For instance, in *Bayonetta*, the player is immersed in a world which obeys its own internal logic. Using the in-game currency of 'halos' (a knowing nod to the popular *Sonic the Hedgehog* and *Halo* franchises), players are able to purchase new weapons and moves which enhance their existing skill base, thereby empowering them to tackle challenges in more individual and creative ways. However, although this experience seemingly values player freedom and creativity, it ultimately restricts them to a cyclical system of desire, value and exchange which has highly limited value outside of the representational space of the game world. This system is analogous to the structural logic of consumer society. As Baudrillard states: 'You never consume the object in itself (in its use-value); you are always manipulating objects (in the broadest sense) as signs which distinguish you either by affiliating you to your own group taken as an ideal reference or by marking you off from your group by reference to a group of higher status' (61). As an aside, it would be interesting to apply this logic to a reading of *Call of Duty's* multiplayer and the importance of experience points and the reward system within the online community. For Baudrillard, consumption is not predicated on need but is instead reflective of a society in which value is determined through and by cultural signifiers. These cultural signifiers are governed by a code of rules, prohibitions and constraints which reduce the possibilities of meaning. Baudrillard argues that this structural aspect of consumer society is for the most part, beyond the grasp of individuals. I argue that reading computer games as virtual worlds which express the structure of desire enables a reading of the 'real world' and the structures of power which sustain the consumer society.

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Biography

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