

Suffocated by Surplus Enjoyment: A Psychoanalysis of “Gamer Rage”

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Videogames give rise to a rich array of affects, but no affect is experienced as viscerally, or as universally, in videogame play as anger. The emotions associated with videogame anger are far more intense, and often far more memorable, than the comparatively subdued emotions associated with videogame pleasure. Expletive-laden outbursts, explosive rage quits, and even the urge to lash out against someone (often oneself) or something (often one’s controller) can arise in response to videogame play both graphically violent and non-violent, among players of all ages and genders. It is surprising, therefore, that anger remains largely unacknowledged in the literature on videogames, affect, and phenomenology (see Anable, 2018; Cremin, 2016; Keogh, 2018. For an exception, see Ruberg, 2019).

Although videogame anger is age, gender, and content-agnostic, it has a common nucleus: excessive failure. Of course, not every in-game failure causes anger—as Bonnie Ruberg (2019; see also Anable, 2018; Jagoda, 2021) points out, failure can even become a source of pleasure in instances of nonnormative play—but failure always has the potential to arouse anger once it becomes excessive. This is especially clear in competitive play. In competitive videogames such as *Fortnite*, *Overwatch*, and *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, players routinely experience failure and, if online streams, forum discussions, and “gamer rage” video compilations are anything to go by, they also routinely experience anger. This raises what seems to be a paradox, akin to the one Jesper Juul (2013, p. 2) explores in his book *The Art of Failure*. If excessive failure in videogame play makes players angry, and if players do not derive pleasure from anger, then why do so many people voluntarily play videogames wherein they fail excessively?

The answer I propose in this paper is that failure is unconsciously enjoyable, rather than consciously pleasurable, for the playing subject. Anger, I contend, is an emotional response to a “surplus” of enjoyment (Žižek, 2022), or what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan would call *jouissance*, in videogame play. At first blush, the idea that anger is caused by a *surplus* of enjoyment seems counterintuitive. It may indeed seem more plausible to suggest that anger is caused by a *lack* of enjoyment in videogame play. But from a Lacanian perspective, the term enjoyment has a technical meaning that renders the former statement more logical than it first appears. For Lacan, enjoyment is not a synonym for pleasure. Enjoyment is a surplus excitation, or excessive satisfaction, that goes beyond what Sigmund Freud (1961) calls “the pleasure principle”. We experience enjoyment when we repeat self-destructive patterns and

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behaviours without consciously meaning to (see Freud, 1961, pp. 8-11 for a famous case study of this phenomenon). Although we may find the repetition of such patterns and behaviours consciously unpleasurable, we derive unconscious enjoyment from them because they enable us to restage the constitutive loss that brought us into being as speaking subjects, which is why we are driven to repeat them despite our conscious intentions (McGowan, 2013). It is in this sense that the enjoyment of videogame play consists not in the attainment of success or mastery but in the repetition of loss and failure (Nicoll, 2022; 2023). Anger is an emotional by-product of enjoying videogames excessively.

Our enjoyment of loss and failure informs our unconscious rationale for playing videogames, but because we cannot consciously avow this enjoyment, we are prone to misidentifying it as an external force that threatens to suffocate our desire. An example explored in this paper is the encounter with the fantasmatic figure of the enjoying other in competitive play. As almost any player can confirm, the figure of the enjoying other in competitive play—the opposing player who appears to enjoy excessively, perhaps even at one’s own expense—can arouse intense anger. In the subject’s fantasy space, the other’s enjoyment appears foreign and menacing (McGowan, 2013, pp. 116-120). But the other’s seemingly excessive enjoyment is nothing but a displacement of the subject’s own enjoyment (Lacan, 1992, p. 198). Our unconscious enjoyment of loss and failure in videogame play is so alien and inexplicable that we tend to project it, via unconscious fantasy, onto someone or something external. Anger is aroused when we “encounter” our enjoyment as an overwhelming excess in the form of, for example, the figure of the enjoying other, or in a failure that seems to repeatedly impose itself on us but is in fact a product of our own making. Anger is thus not simply a result of being rendered “lacking” in videogame play, of failing to attain the pleasure one consciously wishes for. It is instead triggered by an encounter with what Lacan (2014, p. 42) might call a “lack of lack” in the play experience, or what I am calling a surplus of enjoyment that, despite originating from within, can feel as though it suffocates our desire from without.

Anger is an exceptional affect in videogame play because it always shares an indexical relation with its object-cause: surplus enjoyment. It never lies about its unconscious provenance, which cannot be said for other affects in videogame play. Theorists such as Anable (2018), Ruberg (2019), and Keogh (2018) adopt a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Felski, 2012) when it comes to analysing videogame affects. If I claim to take pleasure in playing videogames, for example, an affect theorist might draw attention to the historical and cultural contexts in which my understanding of “pleasure” has been constructed (see, for example, Keogh 2018). In this view, pleasure is not simply subjective but is instead a product of historical and cultural norms that dictate what it means to have “fun” when playing videogames. While videogame anger is not immune from cultural construction—it is often made visible as both “negative” and “masculine”, as Ruberg (2019, p. 176) argues—my contention is that when it comes to the psychological experience of videogame play, it never lies. Anger always tells the truth about the self-destructive enjoyment that fuels our desire to play videogames: a truth we work hard to repress.

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