



# The Pleasure of the Playable Text: Towards an Aesthetic Theory of Computer Games

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper argues that the dominant study of the form and structure of games – their poetics – should be complemented by the analysis of their aesthetics (as understood by modern cultural theory): how gamers use their games, what aspects they enjoy and what kinds of pleasures they experience by playing them. The paper outlines a possible aesthetic theory of games based on different aspects of pleasure: the psychoanalytical, the social and the physical form of pleasure.*

## Keywords

*Video game aesthetics, pleasure, cultural theory*

## POETICS VS. AESTHETICS

Like other discourses on new cultural techniques during their formation phase, the discourse on computer games is largely focused on the form and structure of its object of study. Central to most recent approaches are questions regarding the very nature of the computer game system itself: its rules of functioning, its methods of producing signs and the involvement of the user in this process – in short: its *poetics*. This observation hardly comes

as a surprise as computer games are quite possibly the most diverse form of mediated entertainment that we know today, with a wide range of semiotic, syntactic and textual phenomena to account for.

But if there is a lesson to learn from the comparatively mature discourses on other cultural text forms, be it literature, film or television, it is that such a focus on the material level of the text ultimately proves to be unsatisfying. It provides little means to explain the use of games as a cultural commodity, it cannot answer in what context people use a game or what meanings they attribute to it or simply why someone enjoys certain games while disliking others. These are questions that will have to be investigated to position the use of computer games in a larger context of cultural practices, to view them in a framework of power and social control. To address these issues we will need to develop a broader perspective, a perspective that takes into account the specific interrelations between the structure of the text and the modalities of its cultural use. Only through employing such broader perspective can we begin to investigate the aesthetic dimension of the computer game.

While theorization can only aim to supplement thorough audience research in this area – a task that has yet to be undertaken for the field of computer games – I will attempt to outline a possible aesthetic theory of video and computer games based on the concept of pleasure. Pleasure is undeniably an integral part of the computer gaming experience but it is also always experienced in a certain relation to power and the hegemonic ideology, making it one of the central categories of modern cultural theory. I would further like to speculate that a detailed investigation might reveal interesting correlations between computer games' unique structure as playable texts and the kind of pleasure we experience through them.

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## COMPUTER GAMES AS PLAYABLE TEXTS

Given the diverse nature of computer games it seems necessary to establish a common ground on which to base our analysis, a lowest theoretical denominator that incorporates all types of computer games while at the same time emphasizing the qualities that set computer games apart from other cultural text forms. I have chosen the term *playable text* for this purpose, as it summarizes the two structural qualities of computer games that are of prior interest for my approach.

Should computer games be considered texts? I believe they should be, at least in a cultural sense. They are mediated sign systems – there can neither be a thing like a computer game without signifiers nor one that lacks a medium – and they are given meaning by their audience, not only through and during the act of playing itself, but also through the extensive, intertextual culture associated with games. Phenomena such as gaming magazines, internet fan sites or the vast exchange of signs between the realm of popular culture and computer games all serve as circumstantial evidence that there is indeed a lot of meaning produced from computer games – that they are *used* as cultural texts. This assessment is not without controversy however, as prominent

authors, including Espen Aarseth [1] and Mary-Laure Ryan [13], have previously regarded verblivity a prerequisite of the text, a condition clearly not met by the majority of games. This restriction seems to originate from the discourse of literary science – regarding the cultural practices involved in the production and consumption of computer games however, I find little evidence to support such a categorical separation of computer games from other electronic text forms of similarly complex textuality.

But besides being used as cultural texts, computer games are also playable, meaning that they adhere to the conventions of the game as a social activity, which have been acutely observed by Johan Huizinga in his *Homo Ludens* [9]:

Play is a voluntary action or activity, which is assumed voluntarily within certain set boundaries of time and space, but performed according to absolutely binding rules; it has its goal in itself and is accompanied by a sensation of suspense and joy and an awareness of 'being different' from 'ordinary life'. [9]

Huizinga further stresses another important point: the close relationship between game and contest. Not only does he claim historical ties between the two, but he also emphasizes the competitive (“agonal”) nature that both share. Games can be either lost or won – the element of suspense is created through the uncertainty of its outcome. To make this element of competition possible, computer games (like all formal games) utilize an algorithmic rule system, that either governs a contest between two human players (as in *Pong* or *Spacewar*), or simply challenges the player through its implementation of algorithms to deduce and apply certain patterns of action. “They demand that a player executes an algorithm in order to win”, as Lev Manovich puts it. [10]

## ASPECTS OF PLEASURE

As the playing of computer games has little in common with everyday practices targeted at satisfying physical needs, it seems fair to ask why we experience them in a pleasurable way, where this pleasure is coming from. Drawing mainly from Laura Mulvey, John Fiske and Roland Barthes I would like to argue that we can investigate the phenomenon of pleasure on three different levels. These three levels are the psychoanalytical, the social and the physical. Each of these levels corresponds to a different discourse that focuses on different aspects of pleasure and positions it in a different relationship with power. They are however not to be thought of as isolated phenomena, as even seemingly conflicting experiences of pleasure can alternate and overlap. They are rather to be seen as analytic devices through which certain aspects of pleasure might be seen more clearly at the risk of others remaining obscured.

## Pleasure and Psychoanalysis

The psychoanalytical approach places the origin of pleasure within the subconscious. A famous example for this approach is Laura Mulvey's theory of film that attributes pleasure to the power of the gaze [11]. Mulvey proposes that (mainstream) cinema allows its audience to exercise two opposing structures of pleasurable viewing: the narcissistic and the voyeuristic. Narcissistic pleasure results from the identification with the viewed image, an experience that Lacan dates back to our infancy, when a mirror allows us to view ourselves as isolated and autonomous individuals. Voyeurism on the contrary is produced by the male look on the female body, it is a pure masculine pleasure associated with power. Only the female image can satisfy both these opposing structures at the same time: it serves as object and stimulant of male desire while resembling the self-ideal of Lacan's mirror stage through its perfection.

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Mulvey's approach proved to be a major influence for feminist theory, but it hardly seems like an exhaustive explanation for the pleasure we experience from a text. Not only because the theory draws much of its explanatory power from the specific viewing situation of the cinema, but mostly because it denies the possibility of textual pleasure to be of subversive or even radical nature. Pleasure as accounted for by Mulvey can only serve to affirm the dominant ideology. Most of the criticism of the cultural studies movement regarding Mulvey's theory is in agreement at this point, arguing that the viewer does not necessarily have to occupy the position of an "ideal viewer" constructed by the text. Cultural studies theorists argue quite to the contrary that pleasure can arise from resisting the "structures of preference" [5] within a text and from opposing its "dominant reading".

## Pleasure and social identity

This observation leads us to an alternative understanding of pleasure, a pleasure that is not rooted in the subconscious but in the social domain:

Pleasure results, if not from the confirmation of an existing dominant status, from a, somewhat unexpected, empowerment in seeing one's own position as the one equipped with the power of definition. [8]

This "power of definition" is a pleasure of discourse, a pleasure of positioning one's self in relation to the devices of social control. Roland Barthes, who calls this form of pleasure *plaisir*, describes it as a pleasure of the political and social dimension that "comes from culture instead of breaking with it" [2]. It is a "productive pleasure" [5] that actively produces meaning from a cultural text in accordance with one's social disposition, one's *habitus* [3]. Social pleasure always confirms one's identity – it "enjoys the persistence of the self" [2]. Yet this does not automatically result in an affirmation of the dominant ideology as the confirmed identity might as well be one opposing its hegemonic power.

Fiske further differentiates between the pleasures of popular culture and that of critical and aesthetic distance [6]. The practices of aesthetic distance, according to Fiske, tend to emphasize the difference of a cultural text from the historic and material conditions of its production, whereas the pleasures of popular culture are deeply rooted in the materiality of everyday life. Both can be regarded as social pleasures affirming a specific *habitus* – that of the socially and culturally empowered or disempowered.

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### The pleasure of losing oneself

The third form of pleasure that I would like to investigate is the physical pleasure – bliss, ecstasy or *jouissance* in Barthes' terms. It is the pleasure of the body, as suggested by the sexual connotations, but also a pleasure of its dissolution, of "losing oneself" [2]. Bliss is not a product of social discourse, but exists outside of it. It occurs "at the moment of the breakdown of culture", as John Fiske observes [5], rooted not in affirmation or subversion of ideology but in its negation. According to Fiske, bliss is therefore an "evasive pleasure", the pleasure of a body out of control, through which an individual escapes the structures of social discipline. It is not concerned with meaning, as is social pleasure, but with presence and intensity – it is a "reading with the body" [2].

## GAMES AND PLEASURE

Now how can we apply these observations to our object of study, the computer game? It is important to note that pleasure is never a part of the text. It is by no means guaranteed that we experience the same kind of pleasure when we read a text or play a game for the second time. Pleasure is always a product of the historical subject. Yet the text enables the pleasure, it acts as its catalyst, its raw material. The work of Mulvey, Barthes and Fiske further suggests a correlation between the poetics of the text and the kind of pleasure we derive from it. The text shapes our pleasure, either through its signs – e.g. the image of the female body (Mulvey), the melody of a piece of music (Barthes) – or through the modes of production, mediation and consumption of these signs – e.g. the selective reading of a text (Barthes' *Tmesis*) or the specific viewing situation of cinema and television (Mulvey, Fiske). It seems therefore fair to assume that the unique structure of a computer game as a playable text influences the production of pleasure in a similar way – in either favoring, denying or modifying certain forms of pleasure.

Regarding the psychoanalytic aspect of pleasure, a possible approach would be to apply Mulvey's theory of film to the computer game text, an approach German cultural theorist Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky has chosen for her recent analysis of Core Design's *Tomb Raider* [4]. There is little doubt that the character of Lara Croft has contributed significantly to the phenomenal success the title has enjoyed: her idealized proportions

appeal to the pleasure of the male gaze, while her autonomy and courage also offer possibilities of identification for the female player (even though these attributes are traditionally regarded as being masculine). Deuber-Mankowsky argues that through being constantly in the center of the screen, Lara Croft succeeds at binding the player in a “closed circuit of voyeurism and narcissism”, at offering both sexes a reflection of their “better”, or “true self”. These structures of voyeurism/narcissism not only exist in mere analogy to cinema, they are also amplified by the structural principles of the game. The possibility of interaction intensifies the bonds between the viewer/player and the viewed object until the boundaries between the two are dissolved:

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At this point one looks and is looked at, one sees oneself in the seen object: more than that – one sees in it one’s own, better, true self. Viewing pleasure and exhibitionism coincide. One is a man and a woman at the same time. One suffices oneself. [4]

While Deuber-Mankowsky’s approach appears convincing for the analysis of *Tomb Raider*, it will hardly serve us well as a blueprint for a more general aesthetics of computer games. To apply Mulvey’s theory of film to a computer game requires treating the computer game as an “interactive film”. Deuber-Mankowsky justifies this assumption explicitly by observing how closely *Tomb Raider* follows the traditions of the Hollywood movie in regards of its representation as well as its script. While this claim can arguably be made for a classic third-person action-adventure such as *Tomb Raider*, it is simply untenable for the majority of games and game genres, a fact that deprives Deuber-Mankowsky’s argument of much of its explanatory potential. Yet this does not necessarily infer that the psychoanalytical approach in regard to computer game pleasures is a doomed one. There are indeed strong indications that computer games appeal to subconscious structures of the mind, just not necessarily in the sense of Mulvey’s narrow dichotomy of voyeurism and narcissism. The accumulation and exertion of power springs to mind as a central and recurring theme in many computer games and genres, a theme that definitely possesses the power of appealing to subconscious structures, e.g. infantile fantasies of omnipotence or even sadistic desires.

Perhaps we should consider the psychological gratifications offered by computer games to be of a more diverse and complex nature than Mulvey’s theory of film can account for. This suspicion might especially hold true for the area of multi-user games, a field that Sherry Turkle has investigated in detail from the perspective of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy [14]. Turkle’s case studies paint a highly diverse picture regarding the psychological gratifications of assuming an anonymous virtual identity for a prolonged period of time. Many users indeed construct their virtual character as a “better, true self”, but the actual application of this experience to their social life couldn’t diverge further: while the gaming experience has actually helped some users to overcome problems or traumatic experiences of their real life, it has intensified inner conflicts for others, a fact that Turkle

attributes to different practices of identifying with one's avatar or distancing it from one's real life self.

The issue of social identity leads us to the discursive nature of Barthes' *plaisir*. Computer games facilitate the affirmation of one's social identity in pretty much the same intertextual ways as other cultural text forms: we can acquire a taste for certain games, we can read specialist publications or communicate with other players. In short, we can attribute meanings to our games that we draw from social discourse and by producing certain meanings we position ourselves in relation to social control. The algorithmic nature of the rule system further allows players to compare their achievements, thus resulting in social recognition for skilled players – the appeal of this principle has been realized early on by the arcade industry and has led to the introduction of high-score lists. But perhaps of more immediate interest for the aesthetics of computer games are Turkle's observations regarding the affirmation of an identity we only embody in a game – a virtual self we identify ourselves with. Her observations are targeted at multi-user games, but might as well hold true for games that are played alone. Our achievements within the game are always acknowledged by the game system in either an economic or narrative way: our representation in the game world might be granted more power in relation to its environment or a cutscene praises the deeds of our avatar. We can argue with Deuber-Mankowsky that the cybernetic involvement of the player promotes a convergence of the positions of the player and character in a higher degree than the mechanisms of film and literature. Convergence of this kind facilitates the identification with the on-screen action, but at the same time it leaves less room for complementary interpretation. A subversive reading of computer games might indeed be possible, but is often made difficult by the involving structural qualities of the playable text – Barthes' *imesis*, the selective reading as a "source or figure of pleasure" [2], remains an unattainable luxury for the player of a computer game.

The notion of coinciding positions of player and character brings us to the pleasure of "losing oneself", *jouissance* or bliss. The bodily pleasures of experiencing computer games are already hinted at by Deuber-Mankowsky, who argues that as soon as the player has internalized the control scheme of the game – "so that it disappears from consciousness" – a semiotic barrier is broken. As Deuber-Mankowsky puts it, a "merging with the machine" takes place, or we could use the (perhaps a little less pretentious) term of a "cyborg-consciousness", as Ted Friedman does in reference to Donna Haraway [7]. Not only is this "merging" a requirement of pleasure, but it also perpetuates an active neglect of the material and medial conditions that make this pleasure possible. This recursive quality of computer games appears to be a central element of its aesthetics that permeates the level of the algorithmic game system as well as that of the text. David Myers describes this quality extensively by analyzing the succession of events in real-time strategy games [12]. Myers employs a structuralist approach – Greimas' semiotic square – to show that the patterns of action in these games are of circular nature:

The computer game sequences are recursive. That is where Propp's sequence is linear, the computer game sequences are circular. [12]

These circular sequences correspond to the transformation of resources within the game economy, e.g. the sequence "Money → Transformation → Population → Money" that Myers observes in *SimCity*. It is these patterns that Myers makes responsible for the "addictive" quality of these types of games. But recursive does not necessarily mean that the succession of actions and events is of a strictly repetitive or even redundant nature, as the developing state of the game systems constantly demands adjustments to be made to the player's strategy – playing is a repetition with a difference, a "spiraling", as Myers calls it [12].

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I would like to propose that in these recursive patterns two opposing sources of bliss are associated, as accounted for by Roland Barthes: the "erotic of the new" and the "excessive repetition" [2]. If this is the case then we can regard this as an evidence that the textual mechanism of computer games favors escapist bliss over the discursive distance of social pleasure. By constantly involving the player in recursive actions necessary to uncover the secret of the text, it engrosses the physicalness of the player. It grants her/him a temporal sphere detached from everyday life and the powers of social control. Ultimately this observation also sheds different light on the ongoing discussion whether computer games should be regarded as art. The social practice of critical and aesthetic distancing that the appreciation of a cultural artifact as art demands is much easier done with the semiotic and narrative elements of computer games than with the game system itself, as the latter has to be experienced firsthand – through the act of playing.

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