

Only a Game?

Player Misery Across Game Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

When playing videogames, players are frequently submerged in lava, impaled by spikes, and violently buried under rocks. They are slashed, stomped, and shot down by enemies time and again. Moreover, they are often confronted with tragic deaths of beloved characters, annoyed by the monologues of rude end-bosses, and chased by terrifying monsters. As a result, videogame experiences often evoke the feelings of failure, sadness, anger, and fear. Although in normal circumstances, making other people feel negative emotions would be regarded as evil, videogame developers are often praised for their ability to cause misery. So why is it that videogame players do not mind, or even actively seek out, the feeling of emotions which are usually regarded as undesirable?

Videogame scholars and philosophers often categorize videogame-induced emotions based on which aspects of the game cause them. Jesper Juul talks about videogames as a *half-real* medium, consisting of real rules and a fictional world (2011, 1). In line with this, authors often make a distinction between two presumed layers of emotions towards videogames: emotions towards the fictional narrative or world of the game, and emotions which are caused by our interactions with the game as a rule-based challenge (Frome 2007; Tavinor 2009; Bateman 2011; Lankoski 2012; Juul 2013).

In this paper, I will argue that in both cases, players take on a certain perspective, either a *fictional stance* or a *lusory attitude*, that brackets their emotions from their real-life. An effect of this bracketing of game misery is the player's *enjoyment* of games, despite the negative emotions they have as a result of their playing. This enjoyment is connected to multiple paradoxes, such as the paradox of tragedy (why do we enjoy fictional works that make us sad? Cfr. Yanal 1999, 143), the paradox of horror (why do we enjoy feeling fear in fictional contexts? Cfr. Carroll 1990) and the paradox of failure (why do we seek out the, ordinarily unpleasant, experience of failure when playing games? Cfr. Juul 2013, 33). As a result of these paradoxes, the fear, sadness, and feeling of failure caused by videogames are often described as non-actual or inconsequential kinds of misery (Walton 1990, 257; Juul 2013, 43-45; Walton 2015, 77). Indeed, in most game situations, if their emotions become truly unpleasant, the player can simply remind themselves of the fact that *it's only a game*, effectively revoking their fictional or lusory attitude and subduing emotions connected to it. As such, both fictional and lusory caused emotions are only relevant *within the game context*, the boundaries of which are marked by the player's perception of the rules or fictional world of the game. Developers' responsibility in causing player misery is thus rather trivial. But what if developers were responsible for events in videogames that are *not* perceived as fictional or as a part of the game by the player, and created undesirable feelings for these players because of it?

In this paper I investigate a third category of player misery that is less paradoxical and qualitatively different from its lusory or fictionally caused counterparts. With a focus on single-player videogames, I will describe videogame cases in which player misery is caused by elements that, although they are intentionally created by game-developers, are not perceived as part of the game by the players themselves. First of all, there are cases in which fictional elements are presented as real to the player. An example is the apparent malfunctioning of the game when meeting Scarecrow in *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Rocksteady Studios 2009). Although the glitch is only fictional, the first-time player perceives it as real and thus *really* fears for their console or game when encountering it. A second kind of situation occurs when the player is kept in the dark about some rules according to which the game operates. This is the case, for example, in the game *inFAMOUS* (Sucker Punch Productions 2009), in which the player has the choice to save the main character's girlfriend. Upon apparently saving her, however, it is revealed that she was in a different location altogether, and she still dies. Even when the player goes back to an earlier checkpoint and goes to the location where the girlfriend previously died, she can still not be saved, as she is now in the location the game said she was in the first place, leading to some real-life frustration on the player's part. Lastly, there are cases in which the player's perception of *both* the game's fiction and rules are revealed to be mistaken. This happens, for example, in *Undertale* (Toby Fox 2015), when the player chooses to go back to an earlier save file to change their actions in the game's world. Contrary to the way the player perceives the game's rules and fiction, they can never truly erase their actions from the game's world in this way: *Undertale* character Flowey remembers their actions and comments on them, making the actions the player wanted to erase through a manipulation of the game's rules a definite part of the game's fiction.

As a consequence of these kinds of situations, players feel a kind of misery, be it frustration, fear, anger, or sadness, that is no consequence of a fictional or lusory attitude that brackets it from real-life, that is not enjoyed in a paradoxical way, and that cannot easily be subdued by the thought that "it's only a game". Surely, these negative emotions are *caused* by games, but not by any element that is perceived as *internal* to the game world by the player, who is tricked by the game's design. I thus argue that these kinds of misery are in a way more consistent and authentic than emotions towards lusory and fictional aspects of videogames. After all, the developer's communication towards players that causes them, the object they are intended at, and the action output they result in, have actual, real-life relevance.

Keywords

Emotions, Misery, Fiction, Fictional Stance, Make-Believe, Lusory Attitude, Paradox of Horror, Paradox of Tragedy, Paradox of Failure, Fear, Sadness, Anger, Failure

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