

# Enjoyment in the Anthropocene: The Extimacy of Ecological Catastrophe in *Donut County*

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consciousness raising seems to be the most pressing task facing any project for environmental sustainability today. As Andreas Malm (2020, p. 119) puts it in *Climate, Corona, Chronic Emergency*, “a politics of conscious intervention is precisely what now must be revived”. A psychoanalytic interpretation of the climate crisis, however, reveals that a far more urgent challenge is recognizing that we might be deriving what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls *jouissance*, or unconscious enjoyment, from the very worsening of the crisis. For psychoanalysis, the conscious wish to overcome the climate crisis may conceal an unconscious satisfaction in the repetition of loss and failure afforded by the crisis (Burnham and Paul Kingsbury, 2021, p. 3; McGowan, 2020, p. 200; and Morton, 2016, p. 129). A psychoanalytic response to the existential challenge of climate change, then, would focus not on consciousness raising but on revealing where and how our unconscious enjoyment has become implicated in the very crisis that, consciously, we may accept or deny.

To better understand how our unconscious enjoyment has become entangled in the climate crisis, we have an unlikely aid in the medium of the videogame. As Lawrence May (2021, n.p.) argues, an “ecocritical encounter with ecological monstrosity” demands a confrontation with “the monstrosity within”—that is, a confrontation with the “bitter form of ‘pleasure’” derived from the various forms of suffering wrought by climate inaction—and videogames, he suggests, may be the ideal medium through which to encounter this “bitter form of ‘pleasure’”. Taking inspiration from May, this paper contends that videogames are the ideal medium through which to grasp the form that our unconscious enjoyment takes—and, if mobilized against self-destructive capitalism, the emancipatory form it could take—in the Anthropocene. Drawing on an analysis of the videogame *Donut County* (Esposito, 2018), it makes two psychoanalytic interventions in ecocritical theory. The first is that any theory of the climate crisis must account for the subject of the unconscious—not as a nature-dominating individual, but as a hole in material reality. The second is that any project for environmental sustainability must avow what Sigmund Freud (1961) would call the subject’s “death-driven” enjoyment rather than repress or avoid it.

On its surface, *Donut County* seems to have very little to do with climate change, but closer analysis of its ludonarrative structure reveals a sophisticated theory of what Lacan (1997, p. 139) would call the “extimacy”, or intimate exteriority, of ecological

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catastrophe. In *Donut County*, the player takes control of a hole. Their task is to use this hole to swallow the fictional town of Donut County. Swallowing objects makes the hole grow large enough to engulf not only the townsfolk but also the environments in which they live. Here, *Donut County* advances a far more sophisticated theory of subjectivity than that of the various schools of new materialism and realism (wherein the subject is demoted to the status of an object) and historicism (wherein the subject is viewed as a relic of Enlightenment humanism) that predominate in ecocriticism today (see Fluss and Frim, 2022 and Pohl, 2020 for an overview of these schools of thought in the context of ecocriticism). For *Donut County*, as for psychoanalysis, subjectivity is not a synonym for the consciously thinking person. Subjectivity is, rather, a gap, void, or cut in material reality: “an excremental piece of the Real, a recalcitrant, unsymbolizable remainder of every signifying process” (Sbriglia and Žižek, 2020, p. 14). The subject of the unconscious, represented in *Donut County* as the figure of the hole, appears alien and inexplicable to the consciously thinking person because it enjoys in ways that exceed, disturb, and undermine the latter’s conscious intentions. Both psychoanalysis and *Donut County* implore us to identify *with* our death-driven enjoyment—with that which appears falsely foreign to us—as a basis for intervening in the climate crisis.

Common sense might suggest that we should eliminate or overcome our unconscious enjoyment of ecological catastrophe. But *Donut County* demands that we do something much more dialectical and, at first blush, something deeply counter-intuitive, with our death-driven enjoyment. It demands that we incorporate our death-driven enjoyment *into* our political project for environmental sustainability. Once the characters in *Donut County* identify with the figure of the hole, they band together to enlist its destructiveness in an anti-capitalist project. They collectively wrench the hole from its proprietor—the Trash King, a racoon entrepreneur—and redirect it toward environmentally sustainable ends. In doing so, they recognize that the death-driven enjoyment of the hole is not something thrust upon them from the outside—it is more than just a “superego injunction to enjoy” imposed on them by the Trash King (Žižek, 2000, pp. 22-23)—rather, it is a shared absence around which they can unify. For *Donut County*, then, the first step in overcoming the climate crisis will involve psychically reorienting ourselves to it, such that we not only recognize our enjoyment implicated in the crisis, but that we collectively mobilize this enjoyment toward anti-capitalist—and thus environmentally sustainable—ends.

By drawing on psychoanalytic theory, this paper complicates the proceduralist or “serious games” notion that we can utilize videogames to persuade players to take climate change seriously. Benjamin Abraham (2022), Alenda Chang (2020), and Cameron Kunzelman (2021) have each critiqued this notion in relation to ecocriticism. According to my analysis, *Donut County* helps us better understand the psychological dimension of the climate crisis not because it communicates an existing idea or argument about climate change in ludic form, but because it articulates something *we do not know that we know* about the crisis (see Žižek, 2008). *Donut County* confronts players with something that is unconsciously known about the climate crisis; something that even the most cutting-edge climate science and ecocriticism cannot articulate for itself. Like any great text, then, *Donut County* stages a confrontation between the consciously thinking person (or player, in this case) and the subject of the unconscious, and therein lies its value for ecocriticism.

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