

# This Gift of a Fragile Vessel: Encountering Perspectives on the Real in *Slay the Princess*

Péter Kristód Makai

Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz

Address line 1

Address line 2

[peter.makai@mensa.hu](mailto:peter.makai@mensa.hu)

## Keywords

visual novel, Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, subject, phallus, point de capiton

## \$L(a)Y The Princess

*Slay the Princess* (Black Tabby Games 2023) is a Ren'py horror visual novel, where the player enacts the role of a fairy-tale Hero tasked with... *slaying* the Princess? Unlike in most fairy tales, the Princess is a destructive entity who resides in the Cabin and needs to be slain to prevent the end of the world. The game's narrative setup (the Construct) prompts interactions between the titular Princess, the Hero with a non-negligible number of Voices, and a very intrusive Narrator, who encourages the Hero to fulfill his destiny. And yet, even if a Pristine Blade pierces the heart of the Princess, the Hero must die repeatedly, destined to be reincarnated and slaying the Princess again and again. The only certainty is the ending of the Hero's life. But if neither the Princess nor the Hero will remain slain, just what does the Pristine Blade cut?

In this contribution, I read the struggle of the Princess and the Hero as a psychological fable, and I take a stab at interpreting the game through Lacanian-infused psychoanalysis. I assert that the narrative layers of *Princess* are explicitly spatialised metaphors of psychic activity, and the repeated encounters of the main characters embody the meeting of vital psychological forces. To map their structural relations, I read the *Princess* "with Lacan" by applying his theory of the subject to the game's character-relations, and I analyse the role of the Pristine Blade as a phallus and the quilting point of agency.

## LAC(K?)AN IN GAME STUDIES

One can hardly begin to work with the ideas of Jacques Lacan without acknowledging some inherent difficulties in addressing the supple and ever-shifting boundaries of terms in Lacanian psychoanalysis. For a writer whose teachings are said to be "notoriously hard to access and comprehend" (Stavrakakis in Vanheule et al. 2019), and whose writings have variously been called "unreadable" and "impenetrable" (Žižek in Vanheule et al. 2019), his "baroque, intimidating, ever-elusive" texts bedeviling the reader (Vanheule et al. 2019, xvii), the constraints of linear texts are stultifying. The ideal text, for Lacan, is envisioned as „an intricately and deceptively designed labyrinth," one that is „infinite," since „it does not end, it cannot be finished"

Proceedings of DiGRA 2025

© 2025 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

(Vanheule et al. 2019, xix-xx) – not unlike a textual roguelike. It thus seems to me the best practice, then, to treat Lacan’s writings as a textual *Nept-une*, or rather *Nept-zéro*, to be discovered through the perturbations in the orbit of other scholars’ interpretations (Bowie 1991, Evans 1996, Fink 1996, Fink 2016, Hook et al. 2020, Hook et al. 2022, Leader and Groves 1995, Vanheule et al. 2019, Žižek 1991, 2007).

As Voorhees laments, “Lacanian psychoanalysis has only very limited traction in game studies” (2016, 251), which no doubt owes to the theoretician’s elliptic, ambiguous prose. Lacan himself died in video games’ infancy, before they enjoyed wide currency as narrative media. However, the rise of a simulationist medium that is not simply structured *like* language, but is *de facto* enunciated in programming languages *does* leave us with new avenues for applying his theories. As Suduiko has demonstrated, video games can “create a haunting portrait of the basic tensions that define and motivate a human psyche” (2021). More radically, Petry and Petry claim that games are an “almost unconscious of the real” that “could be read and understood as a revealing lie (fiction)” (2012, 11-12). Psychoanalysis, then, remains an as-of-yet largely untapped tool for teasing apart the interactive constructs of the soul (Bown 2017, 61-93).

## MAIN CLAIMS

My contention is that we need precisely this Lacanian twist to make sense of the multiplicity of narrative vectors in *Slay the Princess*. The trailblazer for such advances is Benjamin Nicoll, whose theorisation posits that video game enjoyment is tinged by “the unconscious drive to fail” (2023, 99). Any satisfactory traversal of *Slay the Princess* is, of course, fraught with death – in fact, it is necessary for both You and the Princess to meet their demise repeatedly to break free from the confines of the narrative. I would argue that a linguistic attitude to the unconscious is essential to interpret the game’s narrative construct, which is *built to be phantasy* in the psychoanalytical sense. Eros and Thanatos are at home in the mirror, it is their address, to paraphrase R. S. Thomas.

To be concise, I hope to show that the complex(iti)es of *Slay the Princess* are best interpreted through Lacan’s RSI registers. The Construct is explicitly revealed to be Imaginary through the player’s visit to the textured nothingness of The Spaces Between, where they encounter the Mirror; the Narrator and the UI supply the Symbolic layer, and the interruption of the Real is present in both the End of Everything section and the intentionally traumatic “crash to desktop” when waiting in the maw of forever. I also point out that the Pristine Blade works as a symbolic phallus and serves as a *point de capiton*, an anchor and a master-signifier of agency around which the game revolves.

Each instantiation of its narrative presents a series of engagements between the player’s agential subjectivity (the You of the game, accompanied by the Voices), the authorial subjectivity of the Narrator and the polymorphous Otherness of the Princesses. Tied in a Borromean knot, the outcome of their interaction shifts their imaginary exchange of life and death to a higher dimension, where the player’s godhead (symbolic projection), the Long Quiet offers the perspective of the Princess-vessels as gifts to the Shifting Mound, a complementary godhead embodying desire itself. In-game, the Shifting Mound is referred to as a deity of Death and Destruction, “the Ebb and Flow, the Capacity to Change,” while the Long Quiet’s divine nature and quest is to “rid the world of death and suffering,” if such a thing is possible at all. But

this is a far-from-accurate description of the libidinal energies flowing between them. My goal is to elucidate how the elusive metaphysics of the work can be thrown in sharper relief with the aid of Lacanian psychoanalytical terminology.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper and its on-site presentation at DiGRA 2025 in La Valletta, Malta was generously funded by the Ministry of Science and Education of Poland under the auspices of the RID (Regionalna inicjatywa doskonałości) program, as outlined in contract RID/SP/0047/2024/01, 29.12.2023 r.

## REFERENCES

- Black Tabby Games. 2023. *Slay the Princess – The Pristine Cut*. PC, Steam. Black Tabby Games/Serenity Forge.
- Bowie, Malcolm. 1991. *Lacan*. Cambridge, MA and London, UK: Harvard University Press.
- Bown, Alfie. 2017. *The PlayStation Dreamworld*. London: Polity.
- Evans, Dylan. 1996. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Fink, Bruce. 1996. *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- . 2016. *Lacan on Love: An Exploration of Lacan's Seminar VIII*, Transference. London: Polity.
- Hook, D., Neill, C. and Vanheule, S. 2020. *Reading Lacan's Écrits: From 'The Freudian Thing' to 'Remarks on Daniel Lagache.'* London and New York: Routledge.
- . 2022. *Reading Lacan's Écrits: From 'Logical time' to 'Response to Jean Hyppolite.'* London and New York: Routledge.
- Leader, D. and Groves, J. 1995. *Introducing Lacan*. Cambridge, UK: Icon Books.
- Nicoll, Benjamin. 2023. "Enjoyment with(out) Exception: Sex and the Unconscious Drive to Fail in Videogame Play." *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 28.5: 97–114.
- Petry, A de S. and Petry L. C. 2012. "Possibilities of Encounter between Psychoanalysis and Videogames: Thinking with Freud and Lacan." Proceedings of SBGames 2012. [https://sbgames.org/sbgames2012/proceedings/papers/cultura/C\\_F2.pdf](https://sbgames.org/sbgames2012/proceedings/papers/cultura/C_F2.pdf).
- Suduiko, A. 2021. "Game as Mind: A Psychoanalytic Explanation of *Returnal*. With a Terrible Fate, July 19<sup>th</sup>. <https://withaterriblefate.com/2021/07/19/game-as-mind-a-psychoanalytic-explanation-of-returnal/>.
- Vanheule, S. Hook, D., and Neill, C. 2019. *Reading Lacan's Écrits: From 'Signification of the Phallus' to 'Metaphor of the Subject.'* London and New York: Routledge.
- Voorhees, G. 2016. "Materialist Fantasies: The Voice as *Objet Petit a* in Digital Games." *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 8.3: 247–264. doi: 10.1386/jgvw.8.3.247\_1.

- Žižek, Slavoj. 1991. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge, MA and London, UK: The MIT Press.
- . 2007. *How to Read Lacan*. New York and London: W. W. Norton.