Rethinking Ludic Pleasure from an Object-oriented Perspective

Xin Pan
University of Nottingham Ningbo China
199 Taikang East Road
Ningbo China
xpan042@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Pleasure is a confusing and elusive term. Although many scholarly works in game studies have investigated videogame pleasures (e.g., Salen & Zimmerman, 2014; Swalwell & Wilson, 2008), the field has yet to establish a consistent and clear understanding of this concept. Furthermore, existing research typically approaches the pleasures of videogame play through players' subjective experiences—which, I argue, conflates *pleasure* with *feeling pleasurable*. In other words, these studies tend to describe the characteristics of certain pleasurable feelings than explain what pleasure fundamentally is. As Aristotle (2009) suggests, what is pleasurable and the nature of pleasure should be distinguished: pleasure is the "unimpeded activity" of a natural state (p.261), rather than a "perceptible process" toward such a state (p.137).

This paper extends the conversation beyond player-centred models to encompass object-oriented approaches that favour the nonhuman agencies of the world. Some recent scholarship on posthumanism in videogames has already recognised the importance of nonhuman contribution to ludic experience. Wilde (2024) investigates the assemblage of player and avatar, demonstrating how identity and affect are distributed across human and nonhuman components of play rather than residing solely in the player's body or mind. From this perspective, the avatar is not a passive vessel of player intention but an actant that co-constitutes experience. This position supports the claim that pleasure cannot be reduced to subjective feeling alone. Fizek's (2022) research on idle games examines the pleasure of interpassivity, which derives from delegating player's agency to the game system, demonstrating that pleasurable processes can unfold without direct human participation. Building upon this foundation, this paper further draws on Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology (OOO) and Jane Bennett's vital materialism (a variant of OOO), arguing that videogame pleasure is not simply a product of narratives, mechanics, or player intention, but emerges from the dynamic interplay of avatars, objects, environments, platforms, and players.

The world of videogames is populated by nonhumans, such as props, icons, and creatures, with which players inevitably interact, not to mention the fact that the

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game itself is a nonhuman entity. In the study of ludic objects, Aarseth's example of doors illustrates their different types—fictional doors, as in film, are "merely textures" that cannot be used, whereas virtual doors function as actual doors that can be "opened, closed, seen through, walked through and fired through" (2007, p.42). This distinction reveals how ludic objects relate to game rules — fictional objects are less relevant to rules, with players merely able to perceive them visually without altering their state, while virtual objects can be used depending on specific game rules. Moreover, consider a non-functional door that affords the action of opening yet cannot be opened — is it fictional or virtual? Such edge cases point to the instability of the boundary between representation and simulation. Rather than resolving this instability, I propose that it is precisely the tension between an object's apparent affordances and its actual material constraints that generates a particular form of pleasure.

Taking this idea further, I contend that these entities are not merely used by humans, nor are they subordinate to player intention. According to Harman (2011), "things themselves must have autonomy from their relation to us, or they are not the things themselves" (p.53). Similarly, Bennett (2011) suggests that nonhumans are as significant as humans, all mattering as parts of material ecologies, and she further emphasises that nonhumans are vivid entities, not "entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them" (p.5). These entities possess a "capacity to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (viii), what Bennett terms *thing-power*. From this perspective, players are not the only actors in videogame play or in generating its effects; rather, the entities constituting a gameworld are independent actors that participate in the construction of the sense of play. Building on this stance, I also draw from Sicart's (2022) concept of playthings, understanding ludic objects as things that are first and foremost independent in themselves, and then embodying a dynamic inherent in "things that come into being in the entangled material practice of play" (p.149).

This paper uses *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (BotW) to illustrate that ludic pleasure is emergent and relational, shaped through the contingent entanglements of human and nonhuman actors across situated moments of play. According to its development team, BotW was designed to evoke *airness*—providing players with a sense that they can explore the world of Hyrule without constraints. This world is populated with playthings, including animals, plants, tools, monsters, and food materials, all available for players to interact with creatively. By presenting players with specific situations and objectives, BotW encourages them to freely combine diverse actions, environmental elements, and these playthings to generate countless solutions and outcomes.

These playthings give rise to the pleasant surprise of discovery, which parallels what Aarseth terms epiphany. According to Aarseth, aporia and epiphany denote, respectively, a roadblock that must be overcome, and "a sudden, often unexpected, solution to the impasse of the event space" (Aarseth, 1999, p. 38). If we grant that ludic objects possess thing-power, aporia can be reframed as the expression of an object's resistance to human will; epiphany, in turn, arises not merely from a player's ingenious solution but from the object's own affordances becoming newly legible through contingent interaction. Viewed through the lens of OOO, epiphany preserves the moment of felt pleasure in the player's body while insisting that this moment is catalysed by nonhuman agencies rather than produced unilaterally by the player's cognitive activity.

Such pleasure emerged during my play experience when I controlled Link to fight a Bokoblin, an enemy monster, using a torch. Normally, defeating a Bokoblin directly with a torch is challenging. However, I occasionally discovered that by lighting the torch and using it to ignite grass, the burning grass not only damaged the monster but also generated updrafts that allowed Link to ascend into the sky using a paraglider, without harm. This example shows a novel approach to defeating a Bokoblin, actualised through the interactions between various actors: the playthings (torch, grass, fire, paraglider), the player character Link, and the environment. In this case, the player functions as an agent who brings these elements together, while the emergent outcome — the updraft, the ascent, the unanticipated victory — arises from the material properties and interactions of the objects themselves.

From an object-oriented vantage, the combination of these playthings does not entirely depend on the player's intention and experimentation, but rather on the properties of the objects themselves. According to the Zelda development team, playthings within BotW are categorised into *material objects*—those with specific physical forms, such as trees, rocks, and weapons—and *elements* without constant solid forms, such as fire, water, and ice. These are respectively governed by two mechanics: a physics system, which influences collision and movement, and a chemistry system that handles state changes (Dohta et al., 2017). These systems constitute the fundamental rules of interaction among playthings: elements can alter the state of materials, and interactions between different elements further influence their states. The specific features of a plaything determine its potential connections and the effects it can produce. Moreover, thing-power is also expressed in the ways these playthings restrict players' actions. For instance, material objects cannot alter the states of materials, regardless of what players attempt.

Another manifestation of emergent pleasure occurred when I traversed Hyrule during a thunderstorm and inadvertently witnessed a lightning bolt strike down a patrolling Bokoblin in the distance. In this case, these two entities (lightning and Bokoblin) entered into a relation that unfolded independently of my involvement as a player. Videogames tend to centre human players' experiences in such way that if ludic objects are out of their sight, they cease to exist for players. Yet here, these things revealed their latent capacities and virtualities, actualising themselves in unanticipated ways regardless of human observation or intervention. As long as the game runs, the gameworld sustains its processes — time flows, and playthings autonomously act according to their operational code, exemplified by respawning when a "blood moon" appears—even when players set down their controllers. While successfully combining elements to discover emergence produces a thrill for players, imagining what might happen to playthings also reflects pleasures that extend beyond established connections.

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