

Absent Pleasures or Pleasurable Absence? Player Engagement in Minimalist Retro Horror Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper explores the idea of pleasure through absence, here understood as play occurring in the absence of a main agent or subject, a coherent narrative, clear in-game objectives, and ludic challenges. We argue that such absences invite pleasurable play by enlisting players in filling in these gaps, thereby creating emotional, narrative, and ludic connections and meaning where the game deliberately fails to provide them. Proceeding in three steps, we focus on 1) the characteristics of minimalist retro horror games as a subgenre, 2) the choices in game design that encourage pleasurable play through absence, and 3) the types of engagement elicited through this kind of narrative and gameplay as described by players.

To illustrate these points, we draw on Adam Pype and Tibau van den Broeck's *No Players Online* (2019; Beeswax Games 2025; hereafter *NPO*). *NPO* can be counted among a steadily advancing subgenre of horror games that has been described as analog, creepy, or glitch horror in gaming culture, and as "interface games" (Dawson and Barkman 2026) or "meta horror" (Krampe 2025) in game research. Examples include cult hits, such as *Imscared: A Pixelated Nightmare* (Ivan Zanotti's MyMadnessWorks 2016), *Welcome to the Game* (Reflect Studios 2016), *Home Safety Hotline* (Night Signal Entertainment 2024), and *Forbidden Solitaire* (Grey Alien Games and Night Signal Entertainment 2026), as well as more niche titles, like *Archimedes* (Joshua Hughes 2016) and *Basilisk 2000* (KIRA 2023). Harkening back to the 1990s as a core memory in collective gaming culture, these titles heavily reference early PC and console games and early internet phenomena, such as found footage, creepypasta, and alternate reality games (ARGs). Aesthetically, they combine retro styles (Garda

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2013; Thibault 2016), simulated glitches (Gualeni 2019), and the *mise en abyme*-like reduplication of MS-DOS and Windows ninety-something interfaces (Krampe et al. 2022) with cryptic messages, narratives of haunted media, and decentralized, participatory forms of play across virtual space.

Despite the attention to these phenomena, comparatively little emphasis has been placed on the importance of absence in these games (but see, e.g., Deterding 2015): their intentionally reduced or even pointless gameplay, elusive narrative prompts, and abstract or missing characters. In narratology, such gaps or refusals are conceptualized as forms of under- or disnarration, a phenomenon that draws attention to what is not there while simultaneously conjuring an image of “what might have been” (Lambrou 2019, 7; see also Prince 1988, 2023; Warhol-Down 2010; Waszkiewicz 2024). By accentuating what is taken for granted, whether this be a coherent narrative or ludic objectives, absences are a means to defamiliarize our “ordinary engagement” (Prince 1988, 2), spike curiosity, and inspire alternative modes of involvement (Moenandar 2025).

NPO illustrates the relevance of absence in engendering a horror experience that is at once creepy and pleasurable. Originally released as a short freeware game in 2019, it received a full release on Steam in November 2025 (Beeswax Games 2025a). In the 2019 version, players navigate the abandoned server of a multiplayer first-person shooter, which turns out to be haunted by entities as yet unknown. The “spiritual successor” (Beeswax Games 2025b) of 2025 expands this core idea with multiplied retro interfaces and hacking-themed detective work, filling in some of the gaps of the predecessor while opening others. Despite their differences, both games leverage absence as a means to incite engagement through elusive cues, such as usernames referencing characters that will never fully appear, interfaces promising gameplay experiences that never quite manifest, and cryptic allusions hinting at a deeper meaning that remains just out of reach.

Simultaneously, these absences introduce an eerie horror atmosphere that evokes the uncanny, liminal, and strangely familiar (Krampe 2025, 90; Zawacki 2024, 84; see also Christopher and Leuszler 2022; Perron 2018; Thon 2019 on the aesthetics of videogame horror). Rather than relying on jump scares or fear of the monster, horror here arises from both a “failure of presence” (Zawacki 2024, 83)—the strangeness of ruins, abandoned places, or multiplayer servers where activity should be but is not—and a “failure of absence” (2024, 84), describing agency and presence where it should not be—as manifested in glitches, shadowy figures, and obscure chat messages that highlight the uncontrollable agency of the machine.

This paper focuses on the nexus of horror, absence, and pleasure by reframing absence not as a “lack” but a form of “narrative [and ludic] seduction” (Moenandar 2025). Our main argument therefore holds that, in games like *NPO*, it is precisely the conspicuous lack of conventional (horror game) elements—a tempting suggestion of what could be but is not—that prompts players to follow the trail of breadcrumbs and imaginatively fill its gaps.

To tease out the forms of pleasurable play this minimalist game design invites especially for horror games, we supplement our close readings of *NPO* with a qualitative analysis of selected player reviews published on itch.io for the 2019 game and Steam for the 2025 full release. In addition to providing insight into players’ gameplay experiences, these reviews also function as an access point for the “forensic

fandoms” we see characteristic of this type of game (Mittell 2009, 134–5). Comments function as communal spaces for players to make sense of the games’ various absences and elusive cues, which the 2019 version illustrates: players exchanged theories and findings in their reviews, trying to collectively solve its puzzles and “uncover the secrets of the text” (Lauteren 2002, 224), even extending to Discord servers, googledocs, and an elaborate ARG (Klimentov 2019). These reviews demonstrate the capacity of missing (narrative and ludic) pieces to invite a different yet no less pleasurable form of engagement in and beyond the game. Based on the combined insights of our textual and paratextual analyses, we make the case for minimalist retro horror games to invite (ludo)narrative (Stockwell 2009) and ontological (Bell 2021) resonance: a feeling of prolonged and ‘ineffable’ significance, paired with an acute awareness of the porosity of the boundaries between the virtual and the real, which lingers long after the game window has been closed.

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