

Cruel Pleasure: Affective Security and Territoriality in Games

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relation of ‘pleasure’ to the circulation of cultural and political affect and its application to games that represent conflict in Israel and Palestine. Using the term *cruel pleasure*, I employ affect and post human theory to examine how pleasure in gameplay is related to narratives of security, territoriality, and exceptionalism— and their proliferation. How might the shifts in cultural feeling change the production and availability of certain game subjects, designs, and objectives? To examine how political affect circulates in game culture, I compare the landscape of available games related to Israel and Palestine in app stores and on game platforms in the year 2014 to those available in 2025-26.

For the past twenty years, my research has focused largely on the Palestinian Israeli conflict, scholarship that is especially pertinent following the dark reality of the October 7th attacks in Israel, the subsequent devastating war on Gaza, and the current war in Iran. After 2023, a series of shifts in the U.S. political environment led to changes in the ways that mobile games represent conflict in the Middle East. For example, in 2014, an overwhelming number of simplistic— and obviously racist— games using basic mechanics and stereotypes to create pleasurable experiences for the player were available for download. Games like *Bomb Gaza* populated the Google Play store. This game used a combination of primary colors and cheerful music to signal a fun-filled, pleasurable player experience. When playing and replaying this game, the coded constraints that drive the internal logics of the game and their proximity to pleasure became apparent. Other games titles available in 2014 included *Fighters Israel*, *Code Red*, *Iron Dome*, *Gaza Man*, *Gaza Hero*, and *Gaza Resistance*. The first three of these games claim to fight for Israel, and the last three claim to fight for Gaza. Ten years later, these games have disappeared. The games that are readily available on app stores in 2025 differ greatly from those that were available in 2014. This is not to say there has been a seismic societal shift toward social justice, but rather that the temperature or tolerance for blatantly racist, Islamophobic and antisemitic games has decreased in public spaces. This presentation looks at the relation between mobile game availability and circulations of political feeling in the larger structural landscape, including what counts as ‘pleasure.’

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CRUEL PLEASURE: AFFECT IN GAMES ABOUT ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

I use the term *cruel pleasure* to build on Lauren Berlant's cruel optimism (2011) in order to illustrate how pleasure intertwines with the pursuit of certain life fantasies, even when those fantasies are unstable or harmful. Circulation of positive feelings in what Lauren Berlant terms cruel optimism functions to legitimize structures of power by representing them as natural conditions. I suggest that by paying attention to desires for security/stability that resonate and circulate through digital objects and spaces, we gain a deeper understanding of the ways that the affect economy moves through larger cultural and political structures (Ahmed 2010; Berlant 2011). My exploration of the term cruel pleasure emphasizes the circulations of structural feelings that are present in the coded procedures, designs, and tactics of digital games like *Bomb Gaza* (PLAYFTW 2014), an example I will examine in the larger presentation. By highlighting this structural approach to research on pleasure and feeling, we access a way of knowing, a method of understanding or making visible the often-invisible narratives that are central to our collective futures.

PREVIOUS STUDIES OF PLEASURE IN GAME PLAY

In games research, pleasure is often determined by psychological methodologies or by game play determinants such as self-reported feelings of challenge, competence, and flow. Though scholars like Aubrey Anable (2018), Ronny Mikkelsen and Hannah Wirman (2024) have written about affect theory in games, to my knowledge, research has yet to address the ways that pleasure is often intertwined with larger structural of political feelings that plays out in the production and design of games. By highlighting this structural approach to research on pleasure and feeling, we access a way of knowing, a method of understanding or making visible the often-invisible narratives that are central to our collective futures.

Definitions of pleasure matter because prior research often assumes that pleasure in gaming is a positive achievement, a feeling worthy of measuring for the purpose of testing, using in data sets, and re-producing. In previous game studies scholarship, researchers have employed several definitions of pleasure and enjoyment in gaming, including the reported positive experience of the gamer, playing time and game preference (Poels et al. 2012), feelings of competence and challenge using cognitive theories of emotion (Takatalo et al. 2008), the pleasures of ludo-spectatorship (Xin Pan 2024), and the sense of "game feel" (Wirman and Mikkelsen 2024)—among many others. Seemingly objective data on pleasure may obscure important social and political entities that circulate in games. Building on the work of previous scholars on games and affect, this paper asks, what fantasies are intertwined with the ways we determine what counts as (acceptable) pleasure and desire in games—and how those fantasies (cruel pleasure) are reflected in the production and visibility of mobile games.

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