Coping, Achieving, Repeating: The Pleasures of Videogame Grinding

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the phenomenon of videogame grinding to understand what may motivate players to engage in repetitive play and what are its larger ideological implications. Grinding may be generally identified as the repetition of certain game sections to obtain some in-game reward (e.g. experience points, in-game currency, item drop, and so on). While the implementation of game mechanics encouraging grinding is considered 'lazy or 'boring' game design by some, burdening the game with unnecessary 'filler' or 'fluff' in order to make up for a lack of meaningful gameplay (Bailey 2017; LeJacq 2014; Litt 2021; Morrison 2011; O'Connor 2022; Sorens 2007), grinding remains exceedingly common and is appreciated by several players who find pleasure in the activity (Hernandez 2013; Lawley 2006; Makedonski 2017; Nadel 2020; Rice 2020; Thompson 2000). Grinding is by some even to be considered an expected and constitutive part of the game experience (Mäyrä 2006, p. 132).

While not every videogame will require, or even allow, players to engage in the activity, grinding is a common feature in certain game genres, noticeably, gacha games, such as *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo 2020), massively multiplayer online (MMO) games, such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) and both turn-based and action role-playing games (RPGs), such as *Final Fantasy X* (Square Co. 2001) and *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware 2011) respectively. It is specifically in early RPGs that grinding first appears as a design element introduced in several titles during the 1970s and 1980s (Paez 2020).

Given the repetitive nature of grinding, we may question as to what motivates players to engage in it. I suggest that players engage in repetitive play for the following reasons: mastering; achievement and progress; social status; relaxation. Repeating a certain act has long been considered a way to master difficult situations (Freud 2003) and players may engage in repetitive play to acquire the necessary embodied skill to overcome difficult game sections (Shirinian 2012). Most typically, grinding is a design feature of genres in which game progress may be tied to character status, in the form of levels or experience (e.g. some areas or missions may be unavailable for characters under a certain level). In this case, grinding provides a mean to scale up one's character level and is highly linked to a sense of achievement and progress (Karlsen 2011; Sorens 2007). In the case of MMOs or multiplayer games, grinding may also be motivated by a wish to display social status, if, for example, certain equipment, skins, or tags are accessible only after having reached a certain level.

Finally, repetitive play may also be engaged in as it provides a relaxing, quasi-meditative experience (Muncy 2019).

Noticeable overlap exists between such an understanding of grinding and flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi 2014), where flow is understood as a subjectively experienced state reached by someone engaging in a certain type of skillful activity, where there is an optimal match between individual skill and the activity's challenge. Activities that engender flow tend to provide clear instructions and feedback, a distinct sense of progression, a merging of action and awareness, and a centering of attention on one task, leading to a subjectively felt state of serenity and a loss of sense of time (Csikszentmihalyi 2014).

Flow theory is widely popular in game studies and game design, but it is not without its critics, who consider it an ideological construct disciplining players into becoming subjects of neoliberal capitalism (Soderman 2021). I build on top of these critiques, arguing on the one hand, that grinding can be considered a technique to soothe the anxiety of contemporary precarious life, with players deriving pleasure from clear feedback and sense of progression. In this sense, grinding may be considered a 'numbing' practice, making it possible for players to reach a certain 'zone' where worries are at least temporarily forgotten, in a phenomenon not dissimilar to that observed in slot-machine gambling (Schüll 2012). On the other hand, the pleasurable sense of progression and individual achievement made possible through repetitive grinding, makes the latter a 'training ground' for the neoliberal condition determining precarious life in the first place (Jagoda. 2020; Möring & Leino, 2016). Much like the neoliberal subject (McGuigan 2014), a self-reliant individual ultimately responsible for their own well-being, is required to 'pull themselves up by their bootstraps' to succeed in their endeavors by 'hustling and grinding' (Spence, 2016), players are expected, in the case of grind-heavy designs, to 'put in the work' through repetitive action, essentially engaging in a type of 'playbour' (Paul 2018). While in the social world, success is never guaranteed, videogames offer clear feedback, measurable outcomes and tangible sense of progression, in ways that may result pleasurable for players. In conclusion, videogame grinding may at the same time be a form of attunement to the neoliberal condition as well as a coping mechanism addressing that same condition.

BIO
Andrea Andiloro is a Ph.D. candidate at the Centre for Transformative Media Technologies at Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia. His research focuses on the phenomenology of affect and atmosphere in videogames, game genre, and ideology.

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