

The subject of videogame addiction

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In videogame research, a profound disagreement exists between those who view videogame addiction as a pathology and those who view it as a pathologizing discourse. This disagreement largely falls along disciplinary lines. In the sciences, it is mostly taken as given that people can become problematically addicted to videogames. Most humanities researchers are sceptics by contrast. For them, videogame addiction is less a medical reality and more a medical discourse that stigmatizes “obsessive and impassioned” videogame play as pathological (Butterworth-Parr, 2024: 159; see also Carter et al., 2020; Cover, 2006; Jensen and Bengtsson, 2023; Kirkpatrick, 2016; Shaw, 2015).

Behavioural scientists such as Mark D. Griffiths et al. (2017: 296) defend the pathologization of videogame addiction by claiming that their research “is not about pathologizing healthy entertainment, but about pathologizing excessive and problematic behaviours that cause significant psychological distress and impairment”. They do not do their argument any favours by using pathologizing terms such as “healthy entertainment”. But how might we account for the fact that many people *self-identify* as being addicted to videogames in the “excessive and problematic” terms described by Griffiths et al.? Consider, for example, Ryan G. Van Cleave’s (2010: 155) testimonial from his memoir *Unplugged*: “I refuse to let some self-important egghead tell me it’s not an addiction when I couldn’t stop [playing *World of Warcraft (WoW)*]. I really could not help myself [...] I finally nearly killed myself because I couldn’t summon the will to quit playing *WoW*”. It is possible to take Van Cleave’s testimonial (and others like it) at face-value while still recognizing that videogame addiction is, at least partially, a function of discourse.

Our preoccupation with addiction discourse in the humanities has left us without our own theory of how and why people like Van Cleave become addicted to videogames. Drawing on a psychoanalysis, this article develops such a theory. My contention is that a psychoanalytic approach to videogame addiction can counterbalance the scientific one by focusing on the *subject* of videogame addiction, as against the psychology of videogame addiction (what is going on in the brains of those who become addicted to videogames?) or object of videogame addiction (what is in videogames that causes addiction?).

By *subject* of videogame addiction, I mean a being whose addiction emerges from a particular relationship with what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls the Other with a capital *O*. The Other is not a substantive entity. It is more like a faceless authority that, in Slavoj Žižek’s (2022: 62) terms, represents “the substance of our social being, the thick social network of written and unwritten rules and patterns”. For Lacan, to be a subject is to undergo the universally alienating experience of failing to mould oneself to these social rules and patterns. The subject fails to attain the

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ostensibly limitless enjoyment of becoming what it presumes the Other desires. This failure is necessary because it precipitates a separation of subject from Other. By renouncing the impossible enjoyment of becoming what the Other desires, the subject gains access to a more ordinary form of enjoyment. The subject of addiction has a very different relationship with the Other.

Rather than arriving at enjoyment via the “long detour” of an alienating encounter with the Other, the addict tries to administer enjoyment “at will” (Loose, 2002: 221; see also Palm, 2023: 63-64). Drug addicts, for example, use various substances to administer enjoyment “independently of the Other” (Loose, 2002: 147). Gambling addicts confront the Other as a “game of chance” in a bid to procure an enjoyment that avoids the risk of an encounter with the desire of the Other (Loose, 2002: 147). As Lacan (2024: 29-30) intimates in *Seminar XVI*, the addict’s watchword is something like, “enjoy without restraint!”—enjoy without having to go through the rigmarole of a properly alienating encounter with the Other.

The subject of videogame addiction likewise forgoes an alienating encounter with the Other in favour of immediate access to enjoyment. The videogame addict is a bit like the gambling addict in that they try to exclude the tricky question of desire from their relationship with the Other. But what distinguishes the videogame addict is that they confront the Other as the locus of a pure demand rather than a game of chance. It is often argued that videogame play is satisfying because it presents us with straightforward demands (Bown, 2018; Wark, 2007). If life under neoliberal capitalism is characterized by the frustration of not having the enjoyment we feel we are owed for fulfilling meritocratic demands, then videogame play functions like something of an antidote (Kirkpatrick, 2013; Paul, 2018). It administers enjoyment in exchange for fulfilling fair and transparent demands. In this sense, videogame play is not a retreat from reality as such—many theorists rightly critique this commonsensical assumption (see, for example, Butterworth-Parr, 2024; Cover, 2006; Wark, 2007)—but it can be a retreat from the fact that reality does not “work”, that the Other does not play by the rules. The subject of videogame addiction refuses to accept this lack in the Other, opting instead to confront the Other at the level of a pure demand by means of excessive videogame play.

Humanities and social science researchers often accuse the sciences of not adequately distinguishing videogame addiction from drug and especially gambling addiction (Jenson and Bengtsson, 2023: 2; Karhulahti, 2020: 101-102; Karlsen, 2013: 56). The sciences are charged with typecasting the entire medium as an addictive substance or gambling proxy. My approach addresses this problematic in two ways. First, I argue that, while videogame addiction does indeed have something in common with other addictions—it involves forgoing an alienating encounter with the Other in favour of immediate access to enjoyment—the videogame addict’s relationship with the Other is structurally different from that of the drug or gambling addict. Second, I argue that videogames are textually significant, not simply because they have meaningful narratives or play mechanics that transcend manipulative risk-and-reward loops (gambling machines can, after all, have these things too), but because they can use their ludonarrative structures to expose us to our enjoyment. I analyse *Earthbound* (Ape Inc. and HAL Laboratory, 1994) as an example of a game that uses its ludonarrative structure to stage an encounter between the player and their enjoyment. Videogames occupy an awkward position between art and addiction because the very attribute that elevates them above mere gambling machines—their capacity to expose us to our enjoyment—is also what makes them potentially addictive.

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BIO

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