A failure beyond words: *Baba is You*'s formalization of player subjectivity

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INTRODUCTION

Theorists of player subjectivity have struggled to account for the constitutive role of failure in gameplay. This is because the theoretical frameworks that have predominated in studies of player subjectivity are themselves ill-equipped to account for the constitutive role of failure in human subjectivity. Player subjectivity is often viewed as a product of ideological interpellation, wherein the player believes they are the symbolic identity the game industry wants them to be. But according to psychoanalysis, subjectivity is the result of a failed interpellation rather than a successful one. Subjectivity is a gap in discourse that ensures no individual fits seamlessly into their symbolic identity. As Alenka Zupančič (2025: 11:35) puts it, subjectivity "is an effect not of what is there in discourse, but of what is not there". Videogames satisfy on the basis that they enable players to restage the constitutive failure of subjectivity under the guise of in-game failure. It is my contention, therefore, that we should locate player subjectivity in the repetition of in-game failure rather than the successfully interpellated individual.

For Jacques Lacan (2024: 152), subjectivity is an effect of the absence of any positive terms in language. A signifier generates meaning not through a positive relationship to a signified but through its differential relationship to other signifiers. Subjectivity is precipitated by the impossibility of a complete signified. What this means is that the subject cannot but fail to inhabit its meaning. I might describe myself as a "gamer", for example, but the signified of that term is constantly retreating into the differential chain of signifiers. Even if I believe I am a gamer, I can never inhabit that identity completely. This failure provokes my desire. It prompts me to query what a gamer even is, what it means to be identified as one, and what more I could be doing to prove that I am one. Such queries ultimately go unanswered because there is no final signified, no Other who knows. This "lack in the Other", as Lacan dubs it, lights a fire under the subject. It compels the subject to seek out an object that would fill this lack, but no such object exists. Failure is therefore immanent to subjectivity. When the subject's attempt to become self-identical fails, it is reproducing the constitutive failure of subjectivity.

Videogames construct experiences wherein players can strive for but repeatedly fail to attain their object (Nicoll, 2025). This reproduces the process of subjectivation we all undergo as subjects of language. The repetition of failure in gameplay, like the retreat of the signified into the differential chain of signifiers, creates an illusion that complete satisfaction lies just beyond the next in-game challenge. But just as the signified retreats from us the moment we think we have it, so too does the complete

satisfaction of gameplay. This is why gameplay produces more pain that it does pleasure. As Jesper Juul (2013:2) observes, we tend to experience failure in games more often than we do success. He sees this as paradoxical because he assumes that people do not enjoy failure and therefore try to avoid it under normal circumstances (cf. Ruberg, 2019). But for psychoanalysis, gameplay is psychically appealing precisely because it enables us to restage, and subsequently enjoy, the constitutive failure of subjectivity. While failure in gameplay is not pleasurable per se, it is psychically satisfying because it brings us into closer contact with the constitutive failure that founds us as subjects.

Lacan uses the term enjoyment, rather than pleasure, to describe the strange sort of satisfaction-in-dissatisfaction we get from circling but never attaining our object. Videogames of all types administer this enjoyment in droves. The point is not that failure in gameplay sweetens the eventual pleasure of success, but that failure is itself the source of player satisfaction, with success only offering a sort of second-rate pleasure. As Todd McGowan (2013: 32) puts it, "[p]rivileging loss as the source of our enjoyment means […] that loss is its own reward. We don't experience loss now in exchange for pleasure later but instead enjoy loss because it allows a privileged object to emerge". While the player may believe that the pleasure of success is what they really desire, this belief masks the unconscious aim of gameplay, which is to enjoy failure. The alibi of pleasure allows the player to enjoy the repetition of failure while consciously believing that their goal is to attain success.

Player subjectivity is not the signified of gameplay—it is not a subject position the player inhabits—but an effect of the failure of gameplay to produce a final signified, a complete satisfaction that would end the drive to repeat failure. While players obviously complete games, completion brings only a yearning for new ways in which to enjoy failure. This enjoyment is the index of player subjectivity. Most games do not confront players with the connection between subjectivity and in-game failure, partly because it would be potentially confronting to do so, but also because player subjectivity cannot be directly represented. Any attempt to represent player subjectivity in a game is ipso facto a subject position the player can try (but inevitably fail) to inhabit, and therefore not subjectivity. Player subjectivity consists not in this or that subject position but in the player's failure to fully inhabit a subject position. There are nonetheless some games that manage to expose players to their subjectivity—not by representing it, but by formalizing it through gameplay. *Baba is You* (Hempuli, 2019) is one such example. *Baba is You* uses its formal structure to reveal, but not directly represent, player subjectivity as an effect of in-game failure.

BIO
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