Looking for the Gamic Gaze: Desire, Fantasy, and Enjoyment in Gorogoa

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Abstract
It seems intuitive to conflate the gamic gaze with the player’s act of looking. To do so, however, would be to inherit from the first wave of psychoanalytic screen theory a misleading presupposition that the gaze is synonymous with the look. Taking influence from new Lacanian film theorists such as Joan Copjec and Todd McGowan, this article contends that the gamic gaze is an object in the visual field of play that disrupts the mastery of the player’s look. I develop this argument through an analysis of the 2017 videogame Gorogoa. By confronting the player with the gaze, Gorogoa reveals that the jouissance (enjoyment) of videogame play consists in the player’s unconscious drive to fail rather than their conscious wish for pleasure or mastery. To borrow terminology from Copjec, the gamic gaze marks the point of the player’s culpability—rather than visibility—in the visual field of play.

Keywords
videogame theory, the gaze, Lacan, desire, enjoyment, objet a, Gorogoa

The gaze in videogame play is not where we expect it to be. When looking for the “gamic gaze” (Phillips, 2020), we should not default to an analysis of the player’s act of looking. The conflation of the gaze with the look is an intuitive but misleading...
presupposition inherited from the first wave of psychoanalytic screen theory (Copjec, 2015 [1994]; McGowan, 2003, 2007). For screen theorists such as Christian Metz (1982) and Laura Mulvey (1975), the gaze is something the subject can possess and project onto that which enters its perceptual field. In this view, the technological apparatus—be it a film camera operated by a director or a point-of-view constructed by a videogame designer—gives priority to certain ways of seeing. By inhabiting and internalizing the look of the technological apparatus, we learn how to desire as gendered subjects (de Lauretis, 1987). For screen theory, this is what imbues the act of looking with the potential for symbolic violence. The question of how screen-based technologies such as films and videogames construct or mediate gendered, racist, or panoptic ways of seeing is important. But the gaze is nonetheless not to be found in the act of looking. As new Lacanian film theorists such as Joan Copjec (2015 [1994]), Jennifer Friedlander (2008), and Todd McGowan (2003, 2007) argue, screen theorists such as Metz and Mulvey largely misinterpreted the theoretical foundations of their own work—Lacanian psychoanalysis—by conflating the gaze with the look.¹ In Seminar XI, Lacan (1998 [1973]) is unambiguous in his assertion that the gaze is not an act of looking that the subject can inhabit or possess.² The gaze is, rather, an object, a “stain” in the perceptual field that disrupts the apparent mastery of the subject’s look and their attempts at imaginary identification (Lacan, 1998 [1973], p. 74). “[I]nstead of coinciding with or identifying with the gaze,” writes Copjec (2015 [1994], p. 36, italics in original), the subject of Lacanian psychoanalysis “is rather cut off from it.”

Videogame theorists have argued for the need to differentiate the gamic gaze from the filmic gaze, but in taking screen theory’s conception of the gaze as their point of departure, they typically start from a faulty presupposition that the gaze is synonymous with the look. Amanda Phillips (2020, p. 132), for example, contends that “if something like a gaze operates in gaming, it is more than a visual field. It is, rather, a matrix of recursive vectors of desire among the elements of a gamic system: human, hardware, software, rules, narrative, and representation.” Chris Chesher (2007, n.p.) likewise argues that the term “glaze” is more useful than gaze when analyzing videogame play, not simply because our eyes tend to glaze over during play, but also because videogames themselves seek to capture and hold the player’s look through sticky or adhesive interfaces. Tom Tyler (2013) and Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux (2017) argue that videogames are uniquely equipped to challenge the anthropomorphic gaze because they can play with nonhuman ways of seeing. Laurie Taylor (2003, n.p.) takes inspiration from Lacan to identify the gaze as a “dynamic oddity” that manifests itself in the visual field of play, but she nonetheless locates the gaze in an exchange of looks between player and videogame. In short, when videogame theorists argue for the need to rethink the function of the gaze in videogame play, they typically start from the (explicit or implicit) assumption that the gaze is synonymous with the look. Yet, if we begin with Lacan’s concept of the gaze rather than screen theory’s, we find that the concept of the gaze needs very little modification to be made applicable to an analysis of videogame play. Moreover, the Lacanian concept of the gaze provides insight into the
psychic appeal of videogame play in a way that differs quite markedly from screen theory’s (mis)conception of the gaze as an act of looking.

In Seminar XI, Lacan (1998 [1973], p. 74) describes the gaze as a “stain” in the perceptual field that confronts the subject with the traumatic real of their unconscious desire. More precisely, he identifies the gaze as the objet a of the scopic drive (Lacan, 1998 [1973], pp. 76–77). As he puts it, “[t]he objet a in the field of the visible is the gaze” (Lacan, 1998 [1973], p. 105, italics in original). To understand the gaze, then, it is necessary to begin with Lacan’s enigmatic lost object, the objet a.

The objet a is a constitutively absent object that the subject sacrifices into existence once inaugurated as a speaking being. For Lacan, the subject is a desiring being because the object that causes its desire—the objet a—is always and already missing. Because the object-cause of desire cannot be re-found, desire cannot be satisfied. Any object of desire will inevitably fall short of the sublime satisfaction of the objet a (see McGowan, 2013, pp. 37–39). This is why desire is, in Freudian terms, polymorphously perverse: it is constantly curving around its objet a in search of new and different forms of satisfaction (see Lacan, 1998 [1973], p. 178). Importantly, however, while the subject’s conscious wish is to satisfy its desire, its unconscious aim is to defer and displace its desire, because without its desire, the subject would cease to exist as a symbolic subject. Unconscious desire—the desire to sustain desire—therefore tends to manifest itself in self-destructive, self-sabotaging, and self-undermining actions, because it is through such actions that desire is sustained. This is why unconscious desire normally remains repressed. Any form of encounter with one’s unconscious desire is traumatizing because such encounters lay bare the fact that the subject is unconsciously implicated in its failure to attain its objet a. For psychoanalysis, there is a certain type of pleasure to be found in the pain of not having one’s objet a, and Lacan’s word for this satisfaction in dissatisfaction is jouissance, or enjoyment.

As the objet a of the scopic drive, the gaze is a manifestation of the subject’s unconscious desire in the perceptual field. We tend to think of the perceptual field as an environment that is external to us—an environment that, in other words, we have mastery over or can project ourselves into through acts of imaginary identification. Encountering the gaze as an objet a in the perceptual field is traumatizing because it reveals that the subject’s unconscious desire is out there, implicated in what they thought was external to them. An oft-used, hypothetical example: a patient complains to their psychoanalyst that their romantic relationships consistently end in betrayal. They blame this on their bad luck. Through analysis, however, it becomes clear that the patient has taken unconscious steps in each of their relationships to ensure that the traumatic repetition of betrayal is acted upon them. While the patient’s conscious wish is to have a relationship that does not end in betrayal, the analysis makes clear that their unconscious desire is to maneuver themselves or their partners into scenarios likely to end in betrayal. The patient encounters the gaze when they “see” their unconscious desire entangled in the very repetitions they thought were being acted upon them. In this example, the traumatic repetition of betrayal is an objet a in the perceptual field that obstructs the patient’s conscious wish for a stable relationship. Importantly, however,
the objet a is a psychic obstruction that sustains desire, and this is why the patient experiences enjoyment in their “horror at pleasure” (Freud, 1955 [1909], p. 167) of repeatedly failing to attain it. The gaze is, in other words, an object-cause of desire in the perceptual field—it is not, as in Mulvey’s (1975) formulation, a look that masters an object of desire in the perceptual field. As Lacan (1998 [1973], p. 116) puts it, “the eye [is] made desperate by the gaze”—the eye only adopts a look of mastery because it is desperate to shield itself from the traumatic real of the gaze.

Taking influence from new Lacanian film theorists such as Copjec (2015 [1994]), Friedlander (2008), and especially McGowan (whose 2003 Cinema Journal article “Looking for the Gaze” was the inspiration for the title of this article), in this article, I develop a Lacanian theory of the gamic gaze. I do so to answer the question of where the unconscious enjoyment—as against the scopophilic, phenomenological, or affective pleasure—of videogame play lies. My case study is Gorogoa (Buried Signal, 2017), a videogame developed by Buried Signal and published by Annapurna Interactive in 2017. In Gorogoa, the player solves puzzles by arranging up to four panels on a grid to form images. By solving puzzles in this way, the player uncovers a story about a character whose childhood encounter with a mythical creature—the titular Gorogoa—becomes the basis for his obsessive quest to re-find the creature as an adult. The character’s quest for Gorogoa can be interpreted by way of psychoanalytic concepts such as objet a, the desire of the Other, and das Ding (the Thing). However, my primary focus here is on where and how the gaze manifests itself in Gorogoa, and this relates to the player’s psychic investment in the videogame. The player encounters the gaze in three separate guises in Gorogoa. First, as an absent object in the visual field of play that can be domesticated. Second, as an illusory object that disrupts the fantasy of the enjoying Other. And third, as an impossible object that confronts the player with the traumatic real of their unconscious desire. I borrow each of these ways of thinking the gaze—as absent, illusory, and impossible—from McGowan’s (2007) theory of the filmic gaze, and I develop them in the context of videogame play.

In its deployment of the gaze, Gorogoa reveals that the enjoyment of videogame play, like the gaze itself, is not where we think it is. The Mulveyian concept of the gaze suggests that the enjoyment of videogame play consists in the scopophilic pleasure of mastery. Conversely, the Lacanian concept of the gaze suggests that the enjoyment of videogame play consists in the player’s unconscious drive to fail—to, in other words, aim at but ultimately miss the objet a. By confronting the player with the gaze, Gorogoa makes the player’s unconscious drive to fail visible as the source of their enjoyment. While Gorogoa is my sole case study, my contention is that the gaze as Lacan understands it is operative in all videogames—Gorogoa simply confronts players with it in a way that most videogames do not. My analysis is thus inspired by the Ljubljana school of psychoanalytic theory’s “short-circuit” approach to interpreting cultural texts, wherein the objective is not simply to show how the text illustrates or exemplifies an existing theoretical position, but rather to show how the text makes the reader, spectator, or player “aware of another—disturbing—side of something [the gaze, in this case] he or she [unconsciously] knew all the time” (Žižek, 2006, p. x). I begin with a
psychoanalytic interpretation of Gorogoa’s narrative premise, before discussing the three aforementioned encounters with the gaze and their implications for our understanding of the psychic appeal of videogame play.

**Gorogoa**

Gorogoa begins by presenting the player with a single panel containing an image of a fictional town, viewed from a rooftop perspective. Clicking the panel triggers an animation where a mythical creature—Gorogoa—traipses into the scene, its body largely obscured by the rooftop buildings. The only viewable part of the creature is its colorful crest, which extends above the buildings. Clicked a second time, the perspective in the panel pulls backward to reveal the inside of an apartment, with the rooftop scene remaining visible through the apartment window. A boy appears inside the apartment and catches sight of the creature’s colorful crest. Intrigued, he finds reference to the creature in a book and learns that its appearance is in some way connected to an offering of five idols (Figure 1). The boy sets out to find each of the idols in the hope that, in doing so, he will attract the creature’s desire.

From here, Gorogoa’s core puzzle-solving mechanics take shape. What began as a single panel then splits into two, three, and eventually four panels on the screen, each containing different scenes and images. Puzzles are solved by clicking and dragging panels around the screen to create visual and temporal connections between the scenes and images they contain. Solving a puzzle can be a simple process of arranging two or more panels on the screen to form a continuous image. Sometimes, when a panel is

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**Figure 1.** Screenshot from Gorogoa, Buried Signal. (2017). Multiplatform: Annapurna Interactive. Screenshot taken by author, by permission of Annapurna Interactive.
moved, it splits into two, leaving the player with two panels that contain fragments from
the original image. Fragmented panels can be superimposed onto other panels to form
composite images. The player can also adjust the perspectives of individual panels to
either zoom in on specific details or, as in the above example, zoom out to take in a
larger scene. As the player solves puzzles, the panels reveal more details from the
character’s life, albeit in atemporal order. In one panel, for example, we might see the
character as a boy in the town depicted in the inaugural scene. In another, we might see
him as a young man, caught in the midst of a war. We learn that, as a result of his
formative encounter with Gorogoa, the character becomes increasingly obsessed with
locating the idols that—he thinks—will attract the creature’s desire.

The character believes the idols contain the key to Gorogoa’s desire, and he therefore
internalizes this desire as his own. He dedicates his life to finding the idols, and this
compels him to engage in a variety of obsessional rituals. As an adult, he is depicted
researching Gorogoa obsessively. He undertakes spiritual pilgrimages and returns
hopelessly to the apartment window where he first caught sight of the creature as a boy
(Figure 2). The panels depicting the character as an adult are, however, narratively
inconsistent with those depicting him as a child. As an adult, the character appears
defeated by his quest to discover the secret of Gorogoa’s desire. But as a boy, he is able
find and possess the idols that, in later life, he obsesses over having lost. What becomes
clear is that the adult and childhood scenes in Gorogoa unfold along two, interwoven
psychic planes: one pertaining to the character’s objective reality as an adult, where he
struggles to process the trauma of his formative encounter with Gorogoa (more on this
below), and the other pertaining to his fantasmatic memories of having obtained the

![Figure 2. Screenshot from Gorogoa, Buried Signal. (2017). Multiplatform: Annapurna Interactive. Screenshot taken by author, by permission of Annapurna Interactive.](image-url)
idols as a child. It is for this reason that the idols can be understood as the character’s *objets a*. The idols inaugurate and sustain the character’s desire, but they can only be obtained via fantasmatic retreat into his childhood memories.

By solving puzzles, the player sutures these two psychic planes—the character’s fantasmatic past and the objective reality of his present—together. In doing so, the player makes the idols materialize in the character’s childhood memories. For example, in an early puzzle, the player is presented with three panels: one containing an image of the character as a boy standing next to a bowl (P1), another containing a portrait of an apple hanging from a tree (P2), and a third containing an image of the character as an injured and wheelchair-bound man looking at a crow perched on a tree branch (P3) (Figure 3). By zooming in on the crow perched on the branch in P3, aligning P3 with the portrait of the apple in P2, and placing the bowl in P1 beneath the apple in P2, all three panels become synchronized. This triggers an animation where the crow in P3 flies off the branch, causing the apple in P2 to fall from the tree and land in the bowl depicted in P1. The apple then transmutes into the first of the idols, and the character, as a child, takes possession of it. Each of the idols are obtained in this way—that is, through acts of retroactive temporality wherein the player brings seemingly incongruous scenes and images from the character’s present to bear upon his fantasmatic past.

At first, clicking and dragging panels to solve puzzles in *Gorogoa* seems to constitute a non-diegetic intrusion into the character’s world. But importantly, the puzzles in *Gorogoa* possess diegetic significance in that they are manifestations of the character’s fantasy of having obtained his *objets a* as a child. For example, after solving the puzzle involving the crow, tree branch, and apple, the player finds a picture of the

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**Figure 3.** Screenshot from *Gorogoa, Buried Signal* (2017). Multiplatform: Annapurna Interactive. Screenshot taken by author, by permission of Annapurna Interactive.
puzzle in completed form embroidered onto a pillow inside the character’s apartment (Figure 4). The puzzle appears in the diegetic world of the videogame in the same way it appears to the player in the videogame’s interface. By displaying the completed puzzle in the character’s apartment immediately after it has been solved, the player learns that the videogame’s puzzles are fantasmatic objects that exist in the character’s world rather than non-diegetic intrusions into the character’s world. By solving puzzles, then, the player becomes a diegetic participant in the character’s retroactive fantasy of having obtained his *objets a* as a child. It is also by partaking in this fantasy that the player begins to chip away at its illusory status, exposing the traumatic real that it occludes.

In Freudian terms, we can understand the childhood scenes in *Gorogoa* as “screen memories” that give fantasmatic expression to (and thus occlude) a constitutive trauma that only becomes apparent later in the videogame. For Freud ([1962] [1899]), a screen memory is a childhood memory that has been unconsciously selected for repetition because it gives fantasmatic expression to an unconscious desire or constitutive trauma. Unconscious desires or constitutive traumas that, for the subject, would normally resist symbolization (i.e., remain repressed) find indirect expression in conscious thought by attaching themselves to seemingly banal but repetitive childhood memories. When this happens, the subject unconsciously remodels their memories—they add, exaggerate, and displace details—to offer the unconscious desire or constitutive trauma a more advantageous “point of contact” with their conscious thought (Freud, [1962] [1899], p. 318). Screen memories therefore perform a dual function for the subject: they provide an outlet for repressed content to seek expression in conscious thought, but they also insulate the subject from a naked encounter with the traumatic real of this repressed

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**Figure 4.** Screenshot from *Gorogoa, Buried Signal* (2017). Multiplatform: Annapurna Interactive. Screenshot taken by author, by permission of Annapurna Interactive.
content. Elsewhere, Freud uses the term *nachträglichkeit*—or “afterwardsness” (Laplanche, 1999)—to describe the process of retroactive temporality characteristic of the screen memory.

In *Gorogoa*, the player engages in acts of *nachträglichkeit* by retroactively re-modeling the character’s childhood memories to construct a consistent fantasmatic scenario wherein the character, as a boy, can find and possess his *objets a*. These fantasmatic screen memories literally cover over the character’s objective reality as an adult. For example, in the puzzle involving the crow, tree branch, and apple, the character is depicted in one of the panels as an injured and wheelchair-bound man. By solving the puzzle, the player replaces this disruptive image with a fantasmatic one wherein the apple drops from the tree into the boy’s bowl and transmutes into an idol. Throughout *Gorogoa*, the player is shown many images of the character in states of turmoil and distress, but these disruptive images are, as in the above example, typically covered over through acts of *nachträglichkeit*. By solving puzzles, the player operationalizes the character’s repressive apparatus.

For the character, *Gorogoa* is a fantasmatic manifestation of a constitutive trauma that Lacan might identify as his *das Ding* (the Thing). The Thing is a traumatic void in the field of signification that is opened as a result of the subject’s alienation in and by language. For Lacan, the signifier inflicts a psychic wound on the subject. It cuts into the subject and leaves a negative remainder in their psychic constitution. The cut of the signifier is the constitutive trauma of subjectivity, and this trauma is distinct (but nonetheless inseparable) from the circumstantial traumas of everyday life (see Ruti, 2018, p. 134). To enter the social order is to become a lacking subject in this sense, and the Thing, as Mari Ruti (in Allen & Ruti, 2019, p. 44) explains, “is the (non)object that the subject yearns for as a site of lost wholeness.” The Thing is the abyssal void of subjectivity itself, and it is for this reason that it is experienced as compelling and anxiety-inducing in equal measure. The Thing would ameliorate the subject’s lack if somehow recuperated, but only at the cost of subjectivity itself, for without its lack, the subject would cease to exist as a desiring subject.

As its name implies, the Thing is unsymbolizeable, but this does not stop the subject from attempting to domesticate it by way of fantasy. This is why *Gorogoa* can be understood as a fantasmatic manifestation of the character’s Thing. The character’s brush with the Thing as a child renders him lacking, which is why he dedicates his life to answering the question of what *Gorogoa* wants from him. For the character, *Gorogoa* is an enigmatic zone of unknowing that seems to harbor the ultimate enjoyment of lost wholeness. As an adult, the character can only approach *Gorogoa* through the mediation of his *objets a*, which is why he invests so heavily in his screen memories of obtaining the idols. For Ruti (in Allen & Ruti, 2019, p. 55), *objets a* are nothing but “dim reverberations of the Thing”—they act as a “points of reference for our desire while making sure that this desire doesn’t overwhelm us; they allow us to experience a manageable amount of *jouissance*.” The objet *a*, in other words, prevents us from falling into the traumatic void of the Thing, but it also allows us to siphon “a manageable amount of *jouissance*” from the Thing.
So far, I have provided a psychoanalytic interpretation of Gorogoa’s narrative premise: Gorogoa as a fantasmatic manifestation of the character’s Thing, and the idols as his objets a. I have also touched on the player’s role in giving consistency to the character’s fantasmatic screen memories by solving puzzles. However, it is important to note that the player’s psychic investment in Gorogoa is not analogous to the character’s. For the player, the idols are not objets a but rather objects of desire to be obtained by solving puzzles. To this end, the player does not identify with the character but is instead encouraged to view him as an embodiment of what Lacan would call the desire of the Other. In his book *PlayStation Dreamworld*, Bown (2017) takes inspiration from the Lacanian aphorism that “[the subject’s] desire is the desire of the Other” (see, for example, Lacan, 2014 [2004], p. 22) to argue that videogames present players with Others—not simply characters but also amalgamations of mechanics, narratives, and representations—whose desires players are encouraged to identify as their own. Ash (2015) likewise argues that videogames utilize affective interfaces to position players as desiring subjects. By interfacing with what Ash (2015, pp. 34–38) calls the “resolution” of on-screen objects, players are hysterized into asking what and how videogames want them to desire. In Gorogoa, the player is encouraged to pattern their desire on the desire of the character. Because the character is shown desiring Gorogoa, Gorogoa becomes the player’s objet a. Beyond the character, the entire structure of Gorogoa—from mechanics to narrative to representation—is premised on encouraging the player to desire Gorogoa as their objet a. Put simply, if Gorogoa is the character’s Thing, then it is the player’s objet a.

Given that Gorogoa is an objet a in the visual field of play, my hypothesis is that it also functions as a locus of the player’s gaze. Gorogoa’s absence is used to catch the player’s conscious wish for pleasure or mastery and lure them into a confrontation with the traumatic real of their unconscious desire. The player first encounters the gaze as an absent object that can be domesticated, then as an illusory object that disrupts the fantasy of the enjoying Other, and finally as an impossible object that makes the player’s unconscious drive to fail visible as the source of their enjoyment.

**The Gaze as an Absent Object**

Gorogoa’s absence stains the visual field of play. Its body is only ever depicted in partial form, as in the inaugural scene where the character catches sight of the creature’s colorful crest from his apartment window. There is always something missing from any given configuration of panels, and the player’s role is to find or conjure that missing something into existence by solving puzzles and collecting idols. In this sense, the gaze is initially encountered in Gorogoa as a gap, inconsistency, or contradiction in the visual field of play. However, by solving puzzles, the player is given the power to sew up these gaps, inconsistencies, and contradictions, thereby averting an encounter with the traumatic real of the gaze. The player, like the character, partakes in a fantasy wherein they domesticate the gaze with the goal of rendering it visible as an attainable object of desire. The domestication of the gaze is a fantasy because it implies that the
player can master the perceptual field, overcome their lack, and secure relief from the burden of their desire. As McGowan (2007, p. 81) writes, “[f]antasy relieves the subject from the burden of perpetual lack; within fantasy, lack magically becomes contingent rather than constitutive.” This is how the gaze initially works in Gorogoa (before it is twice undermined, as will be discussed), and it is also how the gaze normally works in videogame play.

The gaze must be operative in videogame play, for without some form of gap, inconsistency, or contradiction in the visual field of play, the player’s desire would remain dormant. At first blush, then, the gaze appears to function in videogame play as it does in external reality—that is, as a stain in the perceptual field that arouses the subject’s desire. But there is a crucial difference: in most videogames, the gaze is constructed as an absence the player can possess, master, or domesticate through active intervention. When videogames present the gaze as an object to be domesticated in this way, they are at their most ideological. In external reality, the gaze cannot be domesticated—it is an impossible object that disrupts the subject’s imaginary and fantasmatic support systems and forces them to confront the traumatic real of their unconscious desire. Videogames tend to promise (but inevitably fail to deliver) on the ultimate fantasy: that players can overcome their lack by attaining their objet a through mastery. Of course, no videogame can provide the ultimate enjoyment because the objet a is constitutively lost. But the psychic appeal of videogame play nonetheless stems from the unattainability of the objet a, because the constitutive absence of the objet a is what arouses the subject’s desire.

Gorogoa allows the player to flirt with the possibility of domesticating the gaze as a means of arousing their desire. For example, to solve an early puzzle, the player must zoom into a pattern inscribed onto a building’s façade. Once studied in microscopic detail, the pattern is revealed to be part of Gorogoa’s face. The player can then slide the panel around the screen, like a peephole, to reveal more details from Gorogoa’s face. The player cannot make Gorogoa’s whole face visible in this sequence because the panel cannot be enlarged to encompass Gorogoa’s face in its entirety. The panel can only be moved from one part of the screen to another, meaning that Gorogoa is only viewable in partial glimpses. This reinforces the point that Gorogoa’s absence stains the visual field of play. Once the player moves the panel to the top-right part of the grid, they reveal Gorogoa’s eye, which is a recurring image in the videogame (Figure 5). Gorogoa’s eye does not itself represent the gaze but rather exposes the very gap, inconsistency, or contradiction in the visual field of play that arouses the player’s desire. Once revealed, it darts around menacingly while an ominous sound plays. This has the effect of disrupting the scopophilic pleasure the player has derived from their act of looking for the creature, thus opening a space for an encounter with the gaze. However, the player is almost immediately given the ability to domesticate the gaze by using the image of Gorogoa’s eye to solve a puzzle. In an unrelated panel, there is an empty silhouette of an apple that, if superimposed onto Gorogoa’s eye, makes an idol materialize in the character’s screen memories. In this sequence, the player makes the gaze visible only to domesticate it, and this provides them with fantasmatic relief from their
desire. Their investment in this fantasy is reinforced by the image of the character obtaining his objet a in the form of an idol. Here, the scopophilic pleasure of looking—of mastering the visual field of play by solving puzzles—covers over the traumatic real of the gaze.

The domestication of the gaze is, however, only possible in the subject’s fantasy space, because the gaze can never be eliminated from the visual field. Its existence can only be obscured, repressed, or covered over with an illusion of mastery, as in the above puzzle. If it were possible to have absolute mastery over the visual field, there would be no reason to dispute the Mulveyian concept of the gaze, but as Lacan argues, there is an ever-present gap, inconsistency, or contradiction in the visual field that disrupts the mastery of the look. Lacan (1998 [1973]) provides an instructive example of this in his analysis of Hans Holbein’s 1533 painting The Ambassadors (Figure 6). The Ambassadors is, for the most part, a conventional figurative painting. It depicts two ambassadors standing amidst a collection of exotic treasures. The painting is, however, stained by the intrusion of an oblique skull-shaped blob, which hovers in the foreground of the scene. Lacan identifies this skull-shaped blob as a manifestation of the gaze. Its presence disrupts the visual coherence of the painting and forces the subject to confront the illusoriness of their mastery over the perceptual field. By undermining the visual epistemology of one-point perspective, the skull-shaped blob dislodges the subject from their fantasmatic position at the center of the visual universe. Its intrusion into the picture also reminds the viewer that everyday objects of desire—such as those collected by the ambassadors—cannot repair the traumatic void that cuts into the visual

Figure 5. Screenshot from Gorogoa, Buried Signal. (2017). Multiplatform: Annapurna Interactive. Screenshot taken by author, by permission of Annapurna Interactive.
field. Importantly, when people look at the painting today, their concern is often with how to comport themselves relative to the painting such that the blob pops into shape as a skull. A Google image search for the painting reveals several images of the blob digitally rendered into a normal-looking skull. There is, in other words, an attempt to avoid a confrontation with the gaze by domesticating it—by rendering its contradictory absence into a visible presence—because confronting the gaze as an instantiation of the objet a in the perceptual field would otherwise be traumatic. We can think of the gaze in Gorogoa along similar lines: it is a stain in the perceptual field that arouses the player’s desire, but the player is—initially, at least—given the power to domesticate it.

Figure 6. Holbein, Hans. (1533). The Ambassadors. Oil on oak. London: The National Gallery. Licensed for non-commercial use under a Creative Commons agreement. Retrieved from: https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hans-holbein-the-younger-the-ambassadors (Accessed August 2021).
The Gaze as an Illusory Object

*Gorogoa* leveraging the player’s fantasy of domesticating the gaze to coax them into two separate encounters with the traumatic real of the gaze. The first of these encounters occurs near the end of the videogame. Once the idols are collected, they come together to form an offering for *Gorogoa*, as anticipated. This brings the character, as a boy, face-to-face with the creature (Figure 7). However, the scene very quickly turns ominous. Rather than appeasing *Gorogoa*’s desire, the idols burst into flames, at which point *Gorogoa* closes its eye—it withdraws the gaze from the player’s attempt at mastery—and recedes into darkness. Defeated, the boy drops to his knees before falling from a great height. Once the boy lands on the ground, the perspective pulls backward to reveal an image of the character as an injured and wheelchair-bound man, looking at the spot where he made his failed offering as a boy. This scene is critical. It reveals not only that the character’s offering was a failure but also that his memories of obtaining the idols as a child were nothing but fantasmatic illusions. The failed offering thus occasions a radical separation between the character’s fantasmatic screen memories and his objective reality as an adult—a separation the player has, up until this point, rendered indistinguishable by solving puzzles. The player is thus forced to acknowledge their role as an accomplice in bringing this scene to fruition. Yet, once the character’s fantasy is shattered, so too is the player’s investment in the desire of the Other, and this is why the scene constitutes an encounter with the gaze as an illusory object.

As already established, the main character in *Gorogoa* is, for the player, an avatar of the desire of the Other. The player is encouraged to pattern their desire on the

![Figure 7. Screenshot from Gorogoa, Buried Signal. (2017). Multiplatform: Annapurna Interactive. Screenshot taken by author, by permission of Annapurna Interactive.](image)
character’s desire for Gorogoa, and this is why the player identifies Gorogoa as their objet a. For the player, Gorogoa seems to hold the question of what the Other desires. However, once the character’s offering to Gorogoa is exposed as a failure, the groundlessness of the Other’s desire is exposed. The trauma of this scene consists in the revelation that the Other, like the subject, is lacking. The traumatic void at the heart of subjectivity—the unspeakable, constitutive absence that inaugurates the subject as a lacking being—is here revealed to be present also in the Other. This revelation shatters the fantasy that the Other is in any way immune from lack, or that its desire is any way reliable as a compass for our own. We can link this back to the intrusion of the skull-shaped blob in The Ambassadors. The skull-shaped blob is a contradiction in the visual regime of one-point perspective. Yet, the contradiction it draws attention to is the very same contradiction that gives birth to subjectivity—the traumatic void left by the cut of the signifier—and this is why it is traumatizing to see it manifested in the visual field. The intrusion of the skull-shaped blob in The Ambassadors and the shattering of the character’s fantasy in Gorogoa both confront the subject with the gaze. They reveal that there is no Other that can reliably orient the subject’s desire, because the Other is, like the subject, afflicted with an irreparable lack.

Here again, we can see how the Lacanian concept of the gaze is radically at odds not only with screen theory’s conception of the gaze but also with the Foucauldian notion that the gaze holds panoptic power over the subject. When the player exposes the lack in the Other, they also reveal that there is no Other who knows. Videogame theorists often argue that videogames hold biopolitical (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009) and even neurological (Ash, 2015; Väliaho, 2014) power over players. This argument clearly holds weight, but it also relies on a belief in an all-seeing Other who works behind the scenes to ensure its power is being upheld and enforced. The encounter with the gaze in Gorogoa reveals that, despite its appearances, the Other is a figure of lack, just like the subject. As Copjec (2015 [1994], p. 36, italics in original) writes:

> When you encounter the gaze of the Other, you meet not a seeing eye but a blind one. The gaze is not clear or penetrating, not filled with knowledge or recognition; it is clouded over and turned back on itself, absorbed in its own enjoyment. The horrible truth [...] is that the gaze does not see you.

When the player shatters the illusion of the character’s fantasy, they encounter the gaze in the Other not as an answer to the question of what they should desire but instead as a gap, inconsistency, or contradiction in the visual field of play. Through its deployment of the gaze, Gorogoa reveals that the path to enjoyment is not to be found in discovering the secret of the Other’s desire, because such a secret is illusory.

At this point in its narrative, Gorogoa provides an important ethical lesson. In Seminar VII, Lacan (1997 [1986], p. 321) makes a statement that is often taken as the foundational ethic of psychoanalysis: “the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire.” Do not, in other words, give up on your desire. Desire is burdensome precisely because it cannot be satisfied. It is tempting to
seek relief from desire by retreating into the realm of fantasy, and this is the path taken by the character in *Gorogoa*. Rather than reconciling himself to his foundational lack-in-being, the character instead invests in the fantasmatic possibility that he can attain his *objets a* and immerse himself in the lost wholeness of the Thing. In exposing this fantasy as a fantasy, *Gorogoa* disrupts the illusion that the Other has access to a form of unmitigated enjoyment that the player does not. The ethical lesson, which the character ultimately fails to heed, is to find satisfaction in what McGowan (2007, p. 102) calls the “partial enjoyment” of not having one’s *objet a*. This sets the stage for the player’s third and final confrontation with the gaze.

**The Gaze as an Impossible Object**

After his first offering to *Gorogoa* is rejected, the character sets out to repair the idols for a second offering. The difference, this time, is that the idols are obtained not via fantasmatic retreat into the character’s screen memories. Instead, the player briefly revisits key scenes from the character’s life—each of which have appeared at earlier stages in the videogame—and solves a series of new puzzles that repair the idols for a second offering. The lack in the Other, which was just revealed to the player through an encounter with the gaze, is now offered up for repair. Once again, the player is lured into a fantasy of domesticating the gaze. However, because the desire of the Other has been exposed as an illusion, the player is now traversing their own fantasy of obtaining the idols and re-finding *Gorogoa*. This primes the player for the third and final encounter with the gaze, which is the most traumatic because it confronts the player with their unconscious desire.

Once the idols are repaired, they come together to form a second offering, and all four panels merge into one. The character appears beneath the offering as an old man, at which point he simply disappears. The character gives up on his desire—he attains his *objets a* and hurls himself into the abyssal void of the Thing—and thus ceases to exist as a symbolic subject. Once the character disappears, the perspective zooms out to reveal *Gorogoa*. The creature’s look is fixed on the player, and it lingers on the screen for several seconds while an ominous sound plays (Figure 8). Given that *Gorogoa* is a manifestation of the character’s fundamental fantasy, it would seem as though it should disappear along with him. Yet the creature remains even though the character’s fantasmatic screen memories no longer exist to support it. The perspective then zooms into *Gorogoa*’s eye, and the videogame ends. This final scene constitutes the most traumatic encounter with the gaze because, to borrow McGowan’s (2007, p. 168) words, it is the point at which “[t]he desire of the Other ceases to be mysterious and becomes visible as our own mode of enjoyment.” The scene reveals that it was the player’s unconscious desire—not the desire of the Other—that was responsible for the series of failures that led to this point.

To unpack this idea, let us first revisit theoretical territory covered in the introduction. Earlier, I explained that the gaze is an avatar of the *objet a* in the perceptual field. It is for this reason that the gaze is always encountered as a stain in the perceptual
field that cannot be mastered, as in *The Ambassadors*. If the objet a could somehow be mastered, the subject would cease to exist as a desiring subject, and this is what happens to the character in *Gorogoa* once he gives up on his desire. This is why, in external reality, the subject is unconsciously driven to curve its desire around its objet a, because by missing its objet a, the subject sustains its desire. Unconscious desire is always on the side of the objet a, and this is why unconscious desire often manifests itself in repetition compulsions that are self-sabotaging, self-destructive, and self-undermining. Acts of self-sabotage preserve the sublimity of the objet a and stoke desire. The conscious wish, unlike unconscious desire, is on the side of what Freud calls the pleasure principle. The subject’s conscious wish to relieve itself of desire—to, as Freud (1990 [1961], p. 2) puts it, rid itself of “excitation”—implants pleasure to acts of mastery. To this end, we should associate the gaze with the subject’s unconscious drive to fail, and the look with their conscious wish for pleasure or mastery.

Whenever the gaze manifests itself in the perceptual field, it reveals that our unconscious drive to fail—not our conscious wish to succeed—has been driving our actions. Perhaps even more traumatically, it reveals that our unconscious desire is entangled in the very repetitions we thought were being acted upon us. We consciously seek mastery over the perceptual field, and we feel frustrated when something or someone in the perceptual field thwart our attempts at doing so. The gaze shows us that our unconscious desire is the very obstruction that prevents us from realizing what we consciously wish for. For psychoanalysis, then, the human being is not a pleasure-seeking animal whose will to power is curtailed by external reality; rather, the human being is a desiring subject whose conscious wish to seek relief from its desire is

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Figure 8. Screenshot from *Gorogoa, Buried Signal*. (2017). Multiplatform: Annapurna Interactive. Screenshot taken by author, by permission of Annapurna Interactive.
repeatedly undermined by its unconscious drive to defer and displace its desire (see Freud, 1990 [1961]; cf. McGowan, 2019). As we have seen, the gaze must exist in videogame play, because the player would have no desire to play videogames otherwise. But the gaze is typically presented in videogame play as an absence that can be domesticated through mastery: an object to be won, a lack to be overcome, a state of plenitude to be reached.

When the player confronts Gorogoa’s look in the final scene, the trauma of the gaze is revealed in its abject totality. Until this point, the player has patterned their desire on the desire of the Other, but once the character disappears, the player cannot turn to the Other to, in Lacan’s (2014 [2004], p. 32) words, “call upon his assent [… to] ratify the value of this image.” The player is subsequently inscribed into the scene as an absence, insofar as the player is in the scene, but not as a self-present avatar or disembodied look of mastery. Instead, the player is in the scene insofar as their unconscious desire is implicated in the very absence (in Gorogoa) that, until this point, has acted as the primary obstruction to their conscious wish for pleasure or mastery. Put another way, the player meets Gorogoa in the final scene as an objet a of their own making—an objet a they deposited in the Other as a means of stoking their desire. Gorogoa is, in other words, an impossible object that is experienced as at once both intimate and exterior to the player. Intimate, because it is a manifestation of the player’s unconscious desire; and exterior, because while it is part of the player, it nonetheless appears in the visual field of play as an object opposed to their conscious wish for pleasure or mastery. It is in this sense that the Lacanian gaze “is not the look of the subject at the object, but the point at which the object looks back” (McGowan, 2003, pp. 28–29). This is also why the mood in the final scene is not one of satisfaction or completion. The character is not shown united with Gorogoa, and Gorogoa’s look implies that the player has succeeded only in failing. The creature lingers on the screen for several seconds, as if to say to the player: “you achieved your unconscious aim, which was to not have your objet a.” What this encounter with the gaze reveals is that the enjoyment of playing Gorogoa—of playing any videogame—consists not in the mastery of an object of desire nor in the discovery of what the Other desires, but rather in the unconscious drive to fail at attaining one’s objet a.

For psychoanalysis, enjoyment is experienced in the “horror at pleasure” (Freud, 1955 [1909], p. 167) of circling the objet a but never having it. It has been argued that videogames are enjoyable because they allow players to overcome failure (Juul, 2013), because they give players access to a form of meritocratic fairness denied to them by neoliberal capitalism (Kirkpatrick, 2013; Paul, 2018; Wark, 2007), and because they are fundamentally pleasurable to the senses (Anable, 2018; Keogh, 2018; Kirkpatrick, 2011; Ndalianis, 2012). These accounts provide valuable insight into the various pleasures associated with playing videogames, but they tell us very little about the enjoyment of playing videogames. The enjoyment of playing videogames, as revealed in the final encounter with the gaze in Gorogoa, consists in the player’s failure to attain their objet a. Failure is not a new topic in game studies: it has been analyzed as, for example, a queer mode of pleasure that undermines the heteronormative imperative to
succeed (Anable, 2018; Ruberg, 2019), and as a “paradox” (Juul, 2013) that problematizes the commonsensical notion that players play videogames to win. Yet, viewed from a Lacanian perspective, failure in videogame play is not a disruptive, countercultural act or an unexplainable, paradoxical problem; it is a mode of enjoyment that is fully consonant with the structure of desire.

Once the player confronts the gaze as an impossible object in the final scene of Gorogoa, the objet a becomes visible as the source of their enjoyment. The player is inscribed into the visual field of play as an absence, in that their unconscious desire becomes visible as the point of impossibility around which their enjoyment has revolved. A brief sample of player reactions to this scene on YouTube gives some anecdotal support to this observation. When players reach the final scene of Gorogoa, they typically fall silent. One player feels “chills” and describes the scene as “beautiful, but scary,” even though he cannot articulate why (Lovelocks, 2017, t. 1:57:09). Another covers his mouth in shock (baXcast, 2019, t. 1:21:09). It is traumatizing to encounter the objet a in the visual field of play, because such an encounter lays bare the fact that the subject’s unconscious desire is inseparable from the very obstructions to pleasure and mastery they thought were being acted upon them. Gorogoa shows us that the enjoyment of videogame play consists in the unconscious drive to fail rather than the conscious wish for pleasure or mastery, which is the inverse of how we normally conceptualize the gaze.

**Conclusion**

The notion that the gaze marks the point at which the subject’s unconscious desire is implicated in the perceptual field may seem like a banal observation in the context of videogame play. Videogames are always taking the player’s desire into account—often in quite transparent ways—and players likewise expect to see their desire registered in some form or another in videogames. When applied to videogame play, then, Lacan’s concept of the gaze might seem overly preoccupied with the player experience. Player-centric theories of videogame play have been critiqued for upholding an anthropocentric investment in the primacy of subjective experience (see, for example, Bogost, 2009; Pias, 2011; Väliah, 2014). But the notion that a Lacanian theory of the gamic gaze is overly player-centric again overlooks the important distinction between the gaze and the look.

The distinction between the gaze and the look can be summarized through the lens of Lacan’s (2006 [1949]) early theory of the mirror stage. The mirror stage is the theoretical bedrock of the first wave of psychoanalytic screen theory, though there is a reason it is rarely mentioned by the new Lacanian film theorists cited throughout this article. The mirror stage describes a process of looking wherein the lacking subject misrecognizes itself in its reflection (a reflection perceived in anything from a literal mirror to a film or videogame) as a non-lacking bodily image over which it has mastery. The notion that the specular image is a site of misrecognition is crucial, here. For
psychoanalysis, the subject is marked by an irreparable lack, and the fantasmatic function of the mirror is to insulate the subject from their lack by furnishing them with an image of bodily wholeness they can inhabit. It is easy to see how the subject’s psychical inclination toward imaginary identification can be exploited through acts of ideological interpellation, and this is precisely the observation screen theorists originally brought to bear on film analysis. For screen theorists such as Metz (1982) and Mulvey (1975), films interpellate viewers as gendered subjects by encouraging them to misrecognize their desire in the desire of on-screen (usually male) protagonists. Videogame theorists have similarly argued that the videogame industry provides players with “designed identities” to inhabit (Chess, 2017). By identifying with these designed identities, players misrecognize themselves as, for example, gendered subjects with preferences for particular videogame genres, or as non-lacking avatars who can exert mastery over the virtual worlds they inhabit. Yet, if imaginary identification is, by definition, a point of misrecognition in the specular image, then there must be a nonspecular remainder in the image that resists reflection and eludes interpellation. The gaze is this nonspecular remainder in the perceptual field, and this is why it cannot be assimilated into any act of imaginary identification or ideological interpellation.

To borrow terminology from Copjec (2015 [1994], p. 30), where imaginary identification marks the point of the player’s visibility in the visual field of play, the gaze marks the point of the player’s culpability in the visual field of play—that is, the point at which the player is implicated in their failure to attain their objet a. Most videogames allow players to recognize their desire in the visual field of play, but very few confront players with the traumatic real of this desire. Like most videogames, Gorogoa initially allows the player to domesticate the gaze, but it does so only to undermine the player’s look of mastery from within. The player is twice confronted with the traumatic real of the gaze in Gorogoa. First, as an illusory object that disrupts the fantasy of the enjoying Other, and second, as an impossible object that makes the player’s unconscious drive to fail visible as the source of their enjoyment. A Lacanian theory of the gamic gaze is therefore not straightforwardly player-centric, because while the gaze is a manifestation of the player’s unconscious desire in the visual field of play, it is nonetheless encountered as something alien, something other, something opposed to the player’s conscious wish for pleasure or mastery. The gaze does indeed mark a point of misrecognition in the specular image, but the content of this misrecognition is not an image of bodily wholeness, as in Lacan’s original mirror stage essay. Instead, the content of this misrecognition is the objet a (as in Lacan’s (2014 [2004], p. 32) later revision of the mirror stage), which is why the gaze always appears as a stain in the perceptual field. When players encounter the gaze, they encounter the distorting effect of their unconscious desire in the visual field of play. The response elicited by such an encounter—“is that my desire?”—attests to the status of the gaze as a site of traumatic enjoyment that is at once both intimate and exterior to the player.
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Notes

1. To be fair, Mulvey (1975) did not have access to an English translation of Seminar XI (which is where Lacan develops his theory of the gaze) when she wrote her “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” article. Mulvey instead based her theory of the gaze on Lacan’s (2006 [1949]) “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” paper.

2. The distinction between the gaze and the look is not one Lacan makes in Seminar XI because such a distinction does not exist in French. Lacan’s original term for what was later translated into English as “the gaze” is “le regard”—a term that, ironically, translates into English more accurately as “the look” (or “stare” or “glance”). The gaze is a late middle-English term with no direct French equivalent and is therefore a mistranslation. It is nonetheless a productive (albeit somewhat confusing) mistranslation, for it allows one to distinguish between the gaze (as a stain in the perceptual field) and the look (as an embodied way of seeing). The closest Lacan (1998 [1973], pp. 72–73) comes to making this semantic distinction himself is in his separation of “the eye” (l’œil) from “the look” (le regard, translated by Alan Sheridan as “the gaze”).

3. This is a generalization, as not all videogames orient players toward experiences of linear progression and mastery. Videogames that reject or undermine the player’s mastery are typically dismissed by reactionary gamers as “not real videogames,” perhaps because they lay bare the impotency of the fantasy of attaining one’s objet a.

4. This should not be read as an affirmation of the meritocratic ideology that individuals are always to blame for their shortcomings and failures. There are, of course, economic injustices that prevent individuals from achieving sovereignty. Psychoanalysis nonetheless maintains that the unconscious plays a role in thwarting the subject’s conscious wishes, which is perhaps
one reason why the psychic investment in capitalist ideology remains unshakeable (see McGowan, 2016).

5. It is worth noting that “let’s players” tend to deliberately exaggerate their affects when playing videogames, but these videos are nonetheless helpful for gaining insight into the played experience of Gorogoa. For similar examples of player reactions to the final scene, see (Machkovech, 2017: n.p. and Wolfe, 2017, t. 54:35).

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