
Ergodic Video Games as Agonist of Masochism in Gamers

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Abstract

Throughout their history, even though their purpose and function have essentially remained unchanged, video games have repeatedly changed their essence, from pioneering technical endeavors, through arcade machines, to thoroughly complex modern video games. At a certain stage of their development, video games were very difficult to complete, with one of the main reasons being that for many years games were primarily played on coin-operated arcade machines, so it was in developers' interest for the games to be challenging. However, there is a crucial difference between difficult video games and video games that we call ergodic video games. The essential difference is that ergodic video games (or video games with ergodic elements) require players to adopt a non-trivial approach, i.e., additional effort, skill, and dedication, and since ergodicity drastically changes the difficulty level of the game, it also requires certain character traits from players, in terms of readiness to respond to frustration with persistence rather than giving up, which often borders on a specific type of masochism. Therefore, ergodic video games are colloquially called *masocore* games, which is a portmanteau of the words "masochism" and "hardcore". This paper aims to explore the causality between ergodic video games and the existence of masochistic character traits in players who play them, as well as how such games, by combining pain and frustration on one side with pleasure and a sense of accomplishment on the other side, provide a gaming experience that is almost impossible to experience by playing classic, non-ergodic video games.

Keywords: video game, ergodicity, masochism, satisfaction, pain, sense of accomplishment

Ergodic Video Games as Agonist of Masochism in Gamers

Introduction

In one of our earlier works (Filipović, 2022), we described the video game as a phenomenon of the present time that has seamlessly elevated itself to a shining pedestal of elevated consciousness where there is no evil, no pain, no suffering, no fear, no punishment, defining it as a phenomenon representing a rare oasis of negentropy and full freedom, a place where the player can do anything, and a place where the player experiences, in life, rarely accessible fulfillment of agonistic instinct and indescribable pleasure of playing.

However, is it always so, and were we, by taking such a stance, entirely correct? Did we, by ignoring the dialectic of "excess freedom," truly understand and comprehend the player's freedom in the video game and the magical ability of the video game entity to, in some way, occasionally and temporarily, but above all selfishly, "outsmart" the player and diabolically subdue them to itself and its goals, often inconsistent with the player's expected goals? Did we truly grasp the unpredictability of the video game entity as one of its crucial qualities? It seems that game creators have recently noticed the undiscovered dialectics of the video game entity, which necessarily does not always want to abide by the rules of the game and can occasionally refuse to be subordinated to the player and unconditionally be object-oriented towards them. There is a certain discrepancy between the ontological content of the freedom of choice delegated to the player in gameplay and the freedom of choice that the increasingly playful video game entity "wants" in order to enable the player new horizons of gaming and winning pleasure. It has been observed that as soon as the player realizes their sovereignty in freedom of choice (Costikyan, 2013) and begins to use it uncontrollably, games immediately appear whose *raison d'être* is precisely the suppression of freedom and gaming pleasure, or at least what is commonly considered freedom and gaming pleasure in video games. Game theory considers this to be a positive sign of

maturity of the game's noumenon and its upcoming genre, "because the game in this way transcends clichés and gains new meanings and possibilities" (Costikyan, 2013).

An increasingly common argument used to explain the emergence and popularity of ergodic video games suggests that game narratives have remained too long in worlds that have become insufficient for a significant number of players to achieve the expected satisfaction, or have even become boring. Thousands of otherwise excellent video games resembled each other, with plots reminiscent of Simon Templar novels, James Bond movies, romantic comic strips like Corto Maltese or Modesty Blaise, and, of course, classic westerns where the "white hat" always triumphs after more or less turmoil and brings expected justice. New needs from this medium emerged, but that was obvious only after the success of games that were different in that essential way, which is approach to playing a video game. These games can and often have multiplayer component, with the accompanying online security issues, which are a result of change in moral norms that changed with the expansion of the ICT and the internet and pose a significant threat (see more: Bjelajac & Jovanović, 2012; Bjelajac & Zirojević, 2013; Bjelajac & Filipović, 2020). However, the interaction between the players in these games, whether cooperative or competitive, mostly exhaust itself in just playing the game, since the difficulty level and the required approach leave little to no space for behavior we otherwise define as an online security issue.

This paper aims to explore the relationship between video games with ergodic elements and the masochistic character traits of players who prefer this type of gaming experience, by first examining the elements that make video games ergodic, then exploring the causality between a non-trivial approach to playing video games and certain character traits of players that can be categorized as masochistic. Finally, we will outline the elements that make video games ergodic, as well as the elements of masochistic enjoyment in playing such video games, whose popularity is currently likely higher than ever with the success of the game Elden Ring, which introduced a wide audience to this genre of games thanks to the involvement of writer G.R.R. Martin, author of the

A Song of Ice and Fire book series, upon which one of the most popular TV series of this century, Game of Thrones, was based.

Video games, esoterism, and ergodicity

The video game, sharing its ontological essence with games in general, as its precursor, has long been defined as a simple pursuit of gaming pleasure and victory by striving to minimize all discomforts and especially avoiding difficulties, as depicted in traditional behavioral models in video games. Following years of predominantly linear progression, there has been a recent emergence of games in which game developers intentionally induce mental distress in players, engaging with their significantly deeper and more intricate emotions. The concept of masochism among video game players has slowly crept into the theory of video games. In the "old" video games, we had the game world as a space through which the protagonist moved effortlessly. The most important characteristic of such a video game space was the ease with which the avatar conquered it. The avatar could do whatever it pleased in the video game space because the environment offered no significant resistance, with some exceptions (see more: Lihačov, 1972; Filipović, 2022).

Clearly, something happened that made the usual gaming satisfaction insufficient for a significant number of players, prompting the noumenon of video games to seek new horizons in the dystopian segment of games we've written about several times before, describing the example of the movie Rollerball, which depicts the eponymous game. I believe the philosophical turn in the approach to video games occurred when game developers realized the allure of esotericism and the influence of occult aspects, symbolism, magic, mystical traditions, myths, and philosophical concepts in enhancing the player's experience, adding depth, mystery, and previously unknown emotional connection to the game world, thus affecting video game sales. Esoteric elements in ergodic games entered the world of video games through the esotericism of toys, which even in primitive times served as a communicator between the sacred world of the game and the profane

world, often being a personification of otherworldly beings (see Tyugashev, 2018). The esoteric elements of toys, most extensively studied in the case of the magic and mysticism of dolls, often allowed players to deeply immerse themselves in the game and create a unique experience that was often transcendental to the classical concept of gaming. Further evolution demanded players' advanced understanding of the esoteric aspects of the game. Players had to invest extra effort in exploring and interpreting the symbols and concepts of the game, leading to more challenging puzzles and painful, endlessly repeated episodes on the path to solving all the questions and reaching the end of the game. We got ergodic video games based on different freedom of choice, which often turns into unfreedom or even coercion, with the video game entity forcing the player to follow the path of painful masochistic pleasure and traumatic experience instead of the path of pleasure and easy victory. This aspect of games is referred to in literature as "ludic agency or ergodic agency, centered around the "ergodic object" which requires exceptional efforts from the player to be "read," with these efforts needing to be linked to the mechanical and structural properties of the object itself (Karth, 2014; Serada, 2022).

Ergodic video games and player masochism

Espen Aarseth wrote about the ergodic property of video games as early as 1997. According to Aarseth, games are cyber-texts that have their own, not always understandable, paradoxes. Players are free to choose a specific path in the game, but in doing so, they necessarily discard all other possible alternative parallel gaming realities during that "first playthrough" (see Aarseth, 1997). In real life, people are aware of the concept of parallel realities, but that aspect is ontologically locked for them. The similarity with real life exists only until the moment of making a choice, which is necessarily irreversible in real life. In ergodic video games, however, this is not the case, so players can return and embark on the path of another, if not countless, then at least several parallel realities. Undoubtedly, it presents a logical quandary whose resolution ultimately propelled the acceptance of ergodic games and

their integration into the gaming landscape. The paramount lesson gleaned from Aarseth's discourse is the recognition of the player's unique role as an active agent of change within the constructed meta-reality of video games, alongside their newfound capacity to craft avatars that serve as the storytellers of their own autonomously devised narratives (refer to Serada, 2022). However, the realm of game theory does not universally embrace the notion of the new video games' ergodic nature. Certain scholars, such as Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella (2020), contend that not all contemporary video games embody inherent ergodicity, often guiding players along predefined paths with a restricted spectrum of potential outcomes and interpretations. Nonetheless, what truly characterizes them as "modern electronic mediums" is their inherent potential for subversion—disrupting conventional paradigms, unmasking avatars, and offering players the freedom of existential choice, a freedom manifest both through the game's narrative arc and its mechanics (as articulated by Gualeni and Vella, 2020).

However, Alesha Serada underscores that "Aarseth based his conclusions on the long-extinct genre of MUD (multi-user dungeon) video games, as well as on the divinatory practices of the Chinese Book of Changes, which actually functions as an oracle rather than a coherent storyteller" (Serada, 2022). At the time Aarseth formulated his perspective on the ergodicity of video games, the notion of today's masochistic games remained beyond the imagination of even the most radical game developers. Nearly three decades later, Aarseth's findings gain sudden relevance as they pose a compelling research inquiry: where lies the threshold at which media violence forfeits its conventional significance? Evidently, this threshold is contingent upon the attitudes of players or involved communities (see Westerlaken, 2017). The critical ethical stance asserts that individuals, as beings capable of empathy, cannot entirely overlook the portrayal of violence in video games, particularly when such depiction becomes an end in itself. Consequently, in the discerning eyes of the most meticulous critical researchers, the game reflects a specific mode of reality perception, rather than merely representing a stance that may seem harsh to some (see more: Anderton, 2016). Additionally, James Newman (2002) has argued

against the notion that video games are inherently ergodic, asserting that "video games can contain interactive or ergodic elements, and it is wrong to consider them solely as one type of experience and engagement." While this assertion is entirely accurate, given that video games represent highly complex, structured, and, as Newman further elaborates in the same text, highly segmented experiences, we derive the liberty to term games with dominant ergodic elements as ergodic video games. It is understood, however, that no single video game, when viewed as a whole, is entirely ergodic, nor can any defining attribute comprehensively encapsulate any video game in its entirety.

Ergodic video games stand as a distinct category wherein players are required to invest effort or engage actively to progress and derive enjoyment from the gameplay. This concept originates from ergodic theory, which explores how systems evolve through various states over time. In the realm of video games, ergodicity is characterized by the imperative for players to exert considerable effort or interaction to access specific segments of the game or to encounter particular aspects of its narrative. This could entail surmounting challenges, exploring the expansive game world, or making decisions that shape the game's trajectory. Within ergodic games, players often wield significant influence over the game's outcome or their overall experience, rendering them captivating and unlike traditional linear gaming experiences. The player's active involvement and commitment contribute significantly to the richness of the gameplay, yielding distinctive narratives and encounters tailored to each player. Ergodic video games frequently demand additional effort, skill, and dedication from players to overcome the game's challenges. Such gameplay dynamics may offer a unique experience, which some players may find too challenging and occasionally frustrating.

Due to increasingly advanced technological capabilities of photorealistic simulation of fictional worlds, ergodic video games are becoming capable of extreme cruelty and violence towards reality. The other type of violence to which players of ergodic (but not only them) games are exposed is described as an abrupt and possibly alarming disruption of the player's sensory encounter, which forces them, as well

as theorists of the ontological being of video games, to rethink the concept of the "player's body" in a way different from the classical approach. This is not always voluntarily surrendered to the video game and the dilemma of whether that body matches or mismatches the player's actual physical body.

In older video games, the player's physical engagement during gameplay is more or less negligible. There are just the hands holding the controller, the senses of sight and hearing, the brain – and that's it. However, in ergodic masochistic video games, the player's body has a significantly more active role and is often subjected to the effects of physical violence. Painful controller vibrations (Stewart, 2022), chair shaking, flashes of blinding light, and disturbing sounds emanating from nowhere or all around, make the player's physical body an active agent of the game. This is another assault by the video game entity on the player's persona, an assault that, in addition to the psychological pain endured by the player's psyche, also causes physical pain that the player accepts and ultimately finds masochistic pleasure in playing. This represents an unprecedented and fundamentally unauthorized incursion of the video game entity beyond the monitor into the player's real world and physical interaction with it. It's as if Alice or Pinocchio walked into the player's real-world from the video game. The terrifying aspect (Serada, 2022) of ergodic games is their resistance to rational control and the potentially traumatic experience that can permanently change the way the player sees themselves and the world.

Discussion

One of the crucial questions in the theory of video games that we still don't have a complete answer to is: what constitutes the pleasure of playing video games? We still don't have an answer due to the notorious fact that the video game is still a phenomenon in the making, a being whose noumenon eludes any control and any somewhat coherent explanation and fitting into the narrow molds into which people habitually place entities they don't quite understand. Therefore, this discussion about ergodic games is a modest attempt to change the

mental filter of the current mass perception of video games from the prevailing one based on moral panic to an academically and scientifically grounded one that will reveal the true face and essence of video games as an otherworldly ontological phenomenon, a brilliant form of entertainment, and a huge global business that has been saving faltering economies and overcoming economic recessions of wealthy countries for several years now, providing unimaginable aesthetic and mental pleasures to billions of people (Filipović, 2016).

Analyzing the moral panic surrounding the impact of video games on individuals and society as a whole, we easily come to the problem of addiction as the main criticism of educational, religious, and cultural authorities, governmental and non-governmental organizations, various family and parental associations, and their efforts to vilify video games and even shift blame onto video games for their own failures in educating and socializing younger generations (Filipović, 2016). This criticism readily raises another question, the answer to which suggests that the pleasure of playing video games is precisely the crucial source and reason for addiction. People who play video games are addicted to the pleasure provided by playing video games. However, like the video game itself, pleasure is not a once-and-for-all given and determined phenomenon. Pleasure changes, and the possibility of loss can be an integral, albeit often painful part of the gaming experience and pleasure (Juul, 2013). In the discussion by Proudfoot (2019) on narrative violence in video games and some aspects of cases where the pain caused by loss in the game makes sense and can lead to pleasure, it is proposed that theory specifically focus on those games that deliberately provoke players' difficult negative emotions such as shame and sadness, appealing to their ethical beliefs in the real world, thus breaking the magical circle of the video game being. It is considered that by entering into the ergodic, as well as any other game, the player enters into a contract with this magical meta-being, voluntarily exposing and accepting, a priori, all negative consequences, including painful emotions about which the player knows almost nothing "pre-first passage." The discussion particularly emphasizes that these emotions are an integral

part of every sadomasochistic game, regardless of the situation of victory or defeat (see more in Serada, 2022).

Masochism is a key entity in the perception of new ergodic video games, whereby this new perception is quite heretical and brings new, different aspects of the essence of video games. It is significantly different from the current perception offered by the main areas of video game studies, narratology and ludology, collectively known as game studies. The current perception of video games has largely failed to provide a coherent answer to the question of "what is the player's pleasure in playing video games?" Among other things, the current perception of video games is criticized for ignoring the state of insufficient understanding of the problem of computer "entertainment" from the standpoint of practical application in the field of gamification, where instead of the player who plays and has a certain emotional and mental relationship to the game, the position of the phenomenon being investigated is taken by the video game itself, separated from the player and the gaming community, often with an implicitly present negative social perception that sometimes exhibits its hysterical protrusions in the current moral panic. The change brought about by ergodic games is, at times, dramatic. The *raison d'être* of modern video games has been and still is to provide the greatest and most voluptuous pleasure of playing and the great, implicit, almost sacred inviolability of player comfort. Conversely, every ergodic masochistic video game strives to make the player feel frustrated, uncomfortable, painful, scared, and at times miserable and dreadful while playing.

The dialectical opposition in contemplating this topic lies in the fact that despite the pain, players persistently continue to play and, again despite the pain, experience the pleasure of gaming which is no less than the usual pleasure and enjoyment of playing "old" games. Hence the cliché "perversion of masochism" (Cowan, 1982), which is the main driving force behind the pleasure provided by ergodic games. It is evident that perversions, distortions, deviations, anomalies evoke extreme excitement in players. To be ordinary and normal means to be like everyone else; to be perverted means to be different, to be unique, to be more desirable and better. Perversion as an anomaly creates

individuality and uniqueness. The particular manifestation of masochism in any individual is the same individual characteristic as his taste in food, clothing style, and music. Pain and pleasure go hand in hand beyond all logic, rationality, and prudence, i.e., beyond everything we consider mentally healthy (Cowan, 1982). This combination of pain and pleasure creates an unbearable contradiction, and every masochistic experience becomes unique and exceptional, just like any other pleasure.

Video games with elements of ergodicity and masochism, Sikart calls "ethically interesting games". From his point of view, these are games with rules that confront the player with mandatory ethical choices (Sicart, 2009, p. 37). But what if the player wants to play against the rules, disagreeing with any of the choices offered by the game? Should a game be offered to meet such demands? Obviously, yes. In a book dedicated to the issues of ontological violence in video games, Liam Mitchell (2018) takes exactly this stance: the mere existence of moral and ethical choice is uninteresting because that choice is usually banal and clearly predetermined by the game system. What truly makes the game interesting is the problematization of how the player makes choices (Mitchell, 2018) or, if the player suddenly realizes, no matter how hard he tries, that he actually has no choice. In the most ethically intriguing games, the player cannot choose an alternative outcome or try to play better to avoid an emotionally difficult situation, which can cause real psychological suffering even for those who usually derive sincere - and entirely permissible - pleasure.

Conclusions

It should be emphasized that video games at the beginning of their development were challenging, but not necessarily as a creative expression of their creators, but as the only additional monetization mechanism they had available. A difficult game simply meant more coins in the arcade machine, which represented higher revenue for the stakeholders at that time. Some of these games, like the video game *Rogue*, inspired genres that are still relevant today, and some of the ergodic video games in their genre description have words like

"roguelike". On the other hand, the games we are discussing in this paper, besides being difficult, also have an exceptional capacity for immersion, which, along with a much more elaborate narrative, gameplay, and game objectives, brings a completely different experience, which, as we have shown in the previous text, directly correlates with a specific kind of masochistic enjoyment. It is also important to emphasize that when we talk about modern video games with ergodic elements, we are not talking about some fringe phenomenon, but about games that have a direct influence on other video games. Thus, from the Dark Souls series, an entire genre called "Souls-like" has emerged in the industry, and certain developmental solutions from those games are used in AAA games, games with the largest budgets aimed at the widest audience. For example, the game Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order by Respawn Entertainment and EA Games, as well as its direct sequel, Star Wars Jedi: Survivor, borrow some elements and concepts from Souls games, but since it is a AAA game, it is possible to choose the difficulty level, so ergodicity practically does not exist unless you choose higher difficulty levels. However, the influence and inspiration of video games with ergodic elements are evident at all levels of video game development. With the record-breaking success of the video game Elden Ring, we can expect further development and branching out of video games with ergodic elements, probably even into genres where we haven't encountered those elements before.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Elements of Masochistic Enjoyment in Video Games



(Author's Research, 2024)

Figure 2. Some elements of ergodic video games

Some Elements of Ergodic Video Games



(Author's research, 2024)

Table 1. List of video games considered ergodic

Game Title	Developer/ Publisher	Genre	Year
Demon's Souls	FromSoftware/ Sony Computer Entertainment	Action RPG	2009
Dark Souls Trilogy	FromSoftware/ Bandai Namco	Action RPG	2011, 2014, 2016
Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice	FromSoftware/ Activision	Action-adventure	2019
Elden Ring	FromSoftware/ Bandai Namco	Action RPG	2022
Hades	Supergiant Games	Roguelike	2020
Cuphead	Studio MDHR	Side-scrolling run and gun	2017
Returnal	Housemarque/Sony Computer Entertainment	Roguelike TPS	2021
Bloodborne	FromSoftware/Sony Computer Entertainment	Action RPG	2015
Hollow Knight	Team Cherry	Metroidvania	2017
Celeste	Maddy Makes Games	Platformer	2018
Super Meat Boy	Team Meat	Platformer	2010
Hotline Miami	Dennaton Games/ Devolver Digital	Top-down shooter	2012
Lies of P	Neowiz Games	Action RPG	2023

(Author's research, 2024)

Ergodičke video igre kao agonist mazohizma igrača

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Sažetak

Kroz svoju istoriju, iako im je namena i funkcija suštinski bivala nepromenjena, video igre su ostatak svoje prirode nekoliko puta menjale, od pionirskih tehničkih poduhvata, preko arkadnih aparata, sve do u svakom smislu kompleksnih modernih video igara. Video igre su u određenoj fazi svog razvoja bile jako teške za kompletirati, čemu je jedan od glavnih razloga to što su se dugi niz godina igre primarno igrale na arkadnim aparatima koji funkcionišu na novčiće, te je developerima bilo u interesu da igre budu što teže. Ipak, postoji krucijalna razlika između video igara koje su teške i video igara koje nazivamo ergodičkim video igrama. Suštinska razlika je u tome što ergodičke video igre (ili video igre sa ergodičkim elementima) od igrača zahtevaju netrivialni pristup, odnosno dodatni napor, veštinu i posvećenost, a kako ergodičnost drastično menja nivo težine igre, ona zahteva i određene karakterne crte igrača, u smislu spremnosti da na frustraciju reaguju upornošću umesto odustajanja, koja se često graniči sa specifičnom vrstom mazohizma. Stoga se ergodičke video igre kolokvijalno nazivaju masocore igrama, što je portmanteau od reči „mazohizam“ i „hardcore“. Cilj ovog rada je da istraži kauzalitet između ergodičkih video igara i postojanja mazohističkih karakternih crta kod igrača koji ih igraju, kao i na koji način takve igre, spojem bola i frustracije sa jedne strane i zadovoljstva i osećaja ostvarenosti kod igrača sa druge strane, pružaju igračko iskustvo koje gotovo da nije moguće iskusiti igranjem klasičnih, neergodičkih video igara.

Ključne reči: video igra, ergodičnost, mazohizam, zadovoljstvo, bol, osećaj dostignuća