
Good Frustrations: The Paradoxical Pleasure of Fearing Death in *DayZ*

Fraser Allison

Computing & Information Systems
The University of Melbourne
fallison@student.unimelb.edu.au

Marcus Carter

Computing & Information Systems
The University of Melbourne
marcusc@unimelb.edu.au

Martin Gibbs

Computing & Information Systems
The University of Melbourne
martin.gibbs@unimelb.edu.au

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Abstract

When a player is killed in *DayZ*, they lose their character with all its advancement, often equivalent to weeks of play; an enormously frustrating and demoralising experience. However, the majority of *DayZ* players view this as a positive and attractive feature of *DayZ*, and one of the keys to its appeal. In this paper we draw on 1,704 responses to a player motivations survey to unpack player experiences of permanent character death and demonstrate how this negative affective moment contributes to the positive affective experience of *DayZ* more broadly.

Author Keywords

Affect; death; character death; permadeath; *DayZ*.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.8.0 [Personal Computing]: General - *Games*.

Introduction

It seems an unaccountable pleasure, which the spectators of a well-written tragedy receive from sorrow, terror, anxiety, and other passions, that are in themselves disagreeable and uneasy.

– David Hume, “Of Tragedy” [5]

The multiplayer first-person shooter *DayZ* is notable for its implementation of permanent character death (or “permadeath”) [3]. In accordance with its ruthless

zombie-themed post-apocalyptic survival narrative, *DayZ* characters begin with only a few rudimentary items, and no weapons, and must scavenge food and water to survive for more than a short period. *DayZ* also has a persistent character identity system, allowing players to build and improve their character over multiple play sessions. Unlike other first-person shooter games, in which death is a minor 2-10 second setback before the character re-materialises, death in *DayZ* involves the permanent death of the player's character, and loss of all items and advancement. Permadesath is thus a prime example of a negative affective moment, in the context of the overwhelming casualisation of death in modern games.

In this paper, we discuss this seemingly counter-intuitive configuration of death, where the game places enormous emphasis on survival and the development of a character that can be killed at any moment. Based on 1,704 responses to a player survey, we discuss how character-death is received positively by players, and a death is only considered negative when judged to be "meaningless". We discuss the contribution of these results to a better understanding of the relationship between positive and negative affect in game play.

Method

We deployed a survey replicating and updating Nick Yee's [6] player motivations template to suit the affordances and practices of *DayZ*. Included in the survey were 10 open-response questions that asked players to describe favoured and disfavoured aspects of *DayZ*, and player interactions they had experienced. The survey received 1,704 completions from 64 countries, of which 98.4% were male (the highest

gender bias we are aware of in a games studies survey). The average age was 23.3 years (SD=6.4).

For this paper, the first author conducted a thematic analysis of the open responses, which was reviewed and updated in consultation with the second and third authors. Each response was cross-referenced against the respondent's answer to the quantitative question: "When you play *DayZ*, how enjoyable do you find the consequential nature of death?"

Findings

In general, players talked about character death in two distinct ways. The first addressed the moment of dying and the immediate consequences; whereas the second and more common addressed the constant awareness of the permanent consequences of dying, and the effect this had on gameplay. In simple terms, the former was considered negative while the latter was considered positive – but a close analysis complicates this reading.

Players liked permadesath even if they didn't enjoy it

The permanence of character death received overwhelming support from players (see Figure 1). Interestingly, of the players who rated their enjoyment of permanence of character death at 1 out of 5 ("Not enjoyable at all"), most still described it as an essential and positive feature.

The consequence of death is what makes day-z what it is. It is what makes it exciting, the thought of having to get all of your gear again is what gets the heart pounding in a dangerous situation and makes the game tactical. Removing this would ruin the game. [England, age 20, permadesath rating: 1/5]

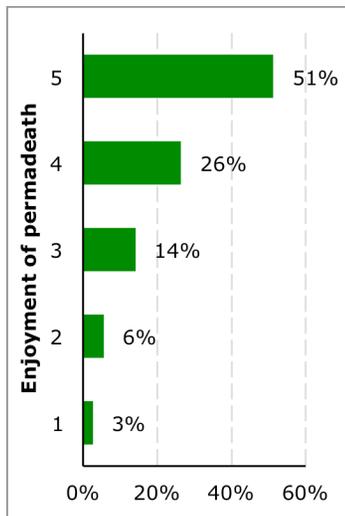


Figure 1: Likert responses to "When you play *DayZ*, how enjoyable do you find the consequential nature of death?"

Remarkably, some of the group that enjoyed permadeath the least nevertheless nominated it as their favourite feature of *DayZ*, reflecting a sense of its positive contribution to the overall game experience.

Character death caused frustration due to loss of loot
When referring to instances of character death, players consistently described an intensely negative experience of frustration. This frustration was associated with the loss of equipment ("loot") they had gathered, and the need to redo this work with a new character.

There is no worse feeling than spending 4 hours gather loot just to be killed. This makes me be VERY careful, and honestly i get really paranoid and jumpy when i don't want to die with good loot.
[USA, age 19, permadeath rating: 5/5]

For some respondents, this frustration was enough to prompt them to stop playing *DayZ* temporarily, as the unpleasantness overcame their enjoyment of the game.

Awareness of risk provided an adrenaline rush
A remarkably high proportion of respondents referred to adrenaline when describing their enjoyment of *DayZ*, stimulated by the heightened awareness that character death had permanent consequences.

When your character is in danger you feel in danger. Your heart races and you get an adrenaline rush. No other video game does this.
[USA, age 18, permadeath rating: 5/5]

Many players also spoke of an adrenaline rush that came upon encountering another player, when waiting to see whether they would be friendly or hostile.

Awareness of risk imbued actions with meaning
Although *DayZ* has no real structured goals, players ascribed a rare sense of meaningfulness to their actions due to the permanent consequences.

The death being so real, as far as it can be in virtual reality, makes the game seem more real, makes the fear real and the adrenaline real. No other game has given me these feelings. [UK, age 31, permadeath rating: 1/5]

There was a keen awareness that this sustained positive experience was built upon a pattern of smaller moments, which taken in isolation could be negative experiences.

Only "meaningless" death was considered a negative
Dying in a way that was considered random or no fault of the player was not considered a positive aspect of *DayZ*. This was usually due to glitches or bugs, but for some players included random attacks by other players.

Discussion

The survey responses describe the distinctive, overriding experience of *DayZ* as one of tension, anxiety and fear, centred on an anticipated sense of loss. Players tried strenuously to avoid the actual experience of loss, and yet connected that same negative experience with the core attraction they felt towards playing *DayZ*, pithily expressed by one player:

Without the knowledge that if you fail, you lose everything, what are you risking by taking action? What would motivate you to keep playing? [USA, age 27, permadeath rating: 5/5]

The apparently paradoxical attraction of negative affect is an old question in aesthetic theory. We began this paper with a quote from David Hume pondering the “unaccountable” pleasures of sorrow, terror and anxiety in fiction in 1758, and more recent scholars have wrestled with the seeming paradox of the popularity of horror fiction [1][4]. Berys Gaut [4] disputed the assumption that negative emotions are necessarily unpleasant, since some experiences of negative emotions are demonstrably desirable – and the responses to our survey support that assertion. But why should a negative experience be pleasurable?

A clue lies in the common reference players made to adrenaline and the thrill of danger. This corresponds to the *excitation transfer effect*, first described by Dolf Zillman [7], in which physiological arousal from one stimulus is (re-)interpreted as pleasant or unpleasant by association with a second stimulus. *DayZ* players appear to seek out situations in which the fear of losing their character’s progress pumps up their adrenaline, and their relief when they manage to survive converts this excitement into a positive experience.

The appeal of risk has been observed in other domains of play and media. Katerina Bantinaki [1] interpreted the attraction of horror fiction as an analogue of risk play: the tendency for people to seek out forms of play that risk physical injury, such as climbing and fighting, allowing them to test their boundaries and learn about risk. This would explain the aversion to “meaningless” death in *DayZ*, as deaths that seemed unavoidable left players with little ability to incorporate the lessons of the experience into their later decision-making; as well as no entertaining experience to recall or share with friends.

Regardless of the psychological mechanism, this research shows a clear case in which the positive experience of playing is directly created by the negative experiences that form the core of the game: fear of loss, fear of ambush, anxiety about unpredictable and potentially violent strangers. Moments of negative affect were not understood in isolation, but were taken as a necessary constituent component of a broader experience, without which the game would not be as enjoyable. Many players acknowledged that they were in a sense willingly playing against their own desire to survive and accumulate, as the fulfilment of these wishes would not make a satisfying game:

You hate to lose gear but love collecting it and are bored when you have it all. [UK, age 19, permadeath rating: 4/5]

Taken together, these conclusions complicate what it means to talk about negative and positive experiences. If the death of a character causes a short-term spike in negative affect and a feeling of frustration, but a longer-term increase in positive arousal, and is consciously recognised as both a positive component of the game and something to be avoided in future, any simple assessment of the experience as “positive” or “negative” is inadequate and misleading.

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Attending Author Bio

Fraser Allison is a PhD student at the Microsoft Research Centre for Social Natural User Interfaces at the University of Melbourne. His research focus is the relationship between users and virtual characters, and his PhD thesis explores how this relationship affects experiences of voice interaction. Fraser completed a Bachelor of Professional Communication (Honours) at RMIT University in 2010, with an honours thesis on how the design of *Mirror's Edge* supports immersion and conveys a subjective experience. Fraser has worked for several years as a consultant and technology manager at an Australian market research consultancy.