Drawing primarily from the digital Role Playing Game “Baldur’s Gate” (BG), Carr explores the concept of how games can evoke the feelings of pleasure and achievement that keeps a player involved.

Carr begins with character generation in BG, raising the topics of traits and alignment into a question of player as avatar. Carr points out that the style of each player imparts different traits to their avatar than the game narrative may intend. Especially in RPGs, what the narrative and player ‘want’ may pit mechanics against story, resulting in heavy-handed actions from the game to enforce the narrative. For example, BG’s narrative requires the avatar’s father be killed, causing grief and a reason to quest. If the avatar tries to kill her father first, she is killed and forced to reload to preserve the story, despite acting within the rules of the system.

The essay then transfers into the discussion of pleasure from gaming, introducing the theory of immersion (synchronization of the player’s imagination with the game world), engagement (breaking immersion by forcing meta-game thought) and flow (the feedback loop of increasing challenge and accomplishment euphoria) as a model for the analysis. The notion of schemas, introduced through Douglas and Hargadon, further refines the model. Schemas are mental sets of information, categorized by the mind to a sensible order, and applied to the current situation, assimilating new information into the structure.

In the immersion state, passive assimilation of the world into a schema gives a reference for the engagement state, where the game schema and player’s existing schemata are employed to make sense of a challenge and overcome it. This is followed by a return to the immersion state until the next challenge is presented.

Douglas and Hargadon propose that ‘flow’ balances between immersion and engagement, rewarding the player’s increasing skill with greater challenges to create the euphoria of achievement.

Carr ends with the recognition that, while the immersion/engagement/flow model can be applied to many games, the validity of this model as an analytical tool to answer ‘why’ a game is pleasurable is difficult to prove. Each player has a reason for why a game provides a pleasurable experience, making analysis completely subjective.

Pleasure & Play focuses on “what the game invites players to do” (Carr, 46), which applies to Quest for Glory and Ultima 7. Both are open worlds that invite exploration and experimentation, but punish “evil” acts to enforce behavior. In a sense, the player is the avatar (especially in Ultima 7), and the only means of advancing the narrative can force the player into certain actions and mindsets, which may end interest in the game world. Is it better to offer the player freedom with consequences, or force a compelling linear narrative where mechanics and script cannot come to odds by the player’s actions?