Computer Games and the Aesthetic Practices of the Self: Wandering, Transformation, and Transfiguration

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Abstract

Computer Games and the Aesthetic Practices of the Self: Wandering, Transformation, and Transfiguration

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This thesis draws on Michel Foucault’s late work on the practices of the self to ask whether the ascetic practices and patterns of action suggested by contemporary computer games, which afford players the opportunities to pursue their own self-set goals, further what might be called a ‘wandering’ away from ourselves, a ‘transformation’ or ‘transfiguration’ of what we are. If self-formation is now a terrain on which power and resistance plays out, it is critical to be able to identify pernicious practices that may bind us to the individualising techniques of power, as opposed to transformative ones that enable us to refuse who we are in the move towards freedom. Broaching this question leads to considerations of the implicit ethical foundations presupposed by Foucault’s anti-normative ethico-aesthetics, and the limitations of its appeal to a coherence or style seemingly without rules. These considerations have implications for the way in which we understand the practices of self-constitution in computer games.

I question whether there is an isomorphism between the way in which power – understood through Foucault’s concept of ‘governmentality’ – works in the present, and the way in which computer games set the conditions under which player practices take place. We are prompted by both to develop a non-coercive relation to a ‘truth’ through an impetus that originates from us. Computer games are about our identification with processes, which are strengthened by the feedback loops in the game and by the mode of being we elect to adopt as a hexis. Such a structure, however, is insufficiently rigid for computer games to produce discrete subjectivities, and analyses of them must be sensitive as to whether there are any systematic concatenation of player responses. To this end, I suggest a framework, based on Foucault’s orthogonal understanding of power-subject, for uncovering the ‘rationalities’ within games, which are the conditions under which players’ practices of the self take place, and which give rise to certain practices of self-constitution over others. It depends on our being able to find or infer player typologies, which are then analysed for their similar patterns of action. This framework is applied to a case study: levelling-up in The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. On the basis of six typologies, a prominent structure of calculative anticipation and deferral emerges, as well as the existence of what is called a super-instrumental approach.

In order to disambiguate these findings with respect to their transformative potential, I turn to the transcendental signifiers in Foucault’s work and consider the practices of the self as seeking a balance between reason and sense – they are revisited through the lens of Schiller’s play drive. This concretises the argument that if the practices of the self are thought capable of moving us towards freedom, we must assume the existence of non-cognitive faculties within us that, when engaged, enable us to be able to distinguish between positive and pernicious self-formation. Given that these judgments cannot be cognitively communicated, we ought to refrain from prescriptivism, yet do have recourse to standards. However, our efforts to cognitively understand this aesthetic interplay between reason and sense are certainly not without importance.
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Introduction

In contrast to some classic games that simply escalated in difficulty, like *Tetris* (Atari Games, 1988) or *Pac-Man* (Atari, Inc, 1982), many contemporary games make possible very different ways and styles of playing; not so much a series of obstacles to be overcome, they are more like labyrinths that invite more than one path through to many different centres. These games intentionally make it a central feature to enable the player to set their own goals within the bounds of what must be done in order to continue playing the game. The players’ self-set objectives can seem disproportionately punishing and demanding in comparison to what is strictly required to continue playing; in gameplaying, there can often be an asceticism that sits oddly with computer games’ cultural status as non-serious low-brow works. There is then, no doubt a reflexive relationship to one’s own aspirations as one plays the game; if a task appears too difficult, it may be abandoned entirely, or the player might try ever harder at succeeding, or even shift the parameters of the goal following some process of self-justification.

Alternatively, the player may pragmatically consider what they would have to master or learn in order to facilitate the success of that task – this then becomes the new, short term goal, whilst the original takes on the form of a longer term one. Thus, the forms of struggle, persistence, relief, and desperation that it takes to hone one’s gamic abilities in order to achieve self-imposed goals undoubtedly have implications for one’s relation to self. The player is incentivised to think for themselves as part of the play experience, to be creative and to express themselves.

So in what way, if any, do the practices implied or suggested by computer games further what might be called a ‘wandering’ away from ourselves, a ‘transformation’ or ‘transfiguration’ of what we are? What is exactly entailed by, and involved in, this process of implication or suggestion? Or is it the case that assuming there is an isomorphism between the way in which power – understood through Foucault’s

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1 Game tutorials or even early levels may be instructive in an instrusively impositional way, but they can also be a means of getting the player to a stage where they can decide for themselves.

2 In this way, players create a relation between challenge and personal control. This can be said to be a customisation which is abetted by some standard features of most games that have a long legacy: ‘the existence of a pause button, the possibility of saving intermediate results, and the existence of different levels of difficulty’ (Grodal, 2009, p.204).
concept of ‘governmentality’ – works in the present, and the way in which computer games set the conditions under which player practices take place, computer games facilitate forms of ‘subjectification’ that abet the extension of power through inducing us to have the right dispositions or ethoi for power to operate seamlessly? If there is such a possibility, given that the practices and patterns of action are voluntary and even playful, how would we tell when they have become compulsive, or pernicious, as opposed to when they are transformative? And further, what is the relationship between the dispositions or ethoi of the players, and the ‘rationality’ within the game that both requires and cultivates them? Finally, what are our ethical ‘obligations,’ if any, if we commit ourselves to the kind of ethico-aesthetic approach that Foucault used to frame his idea of the practices of the self as the practices of freedom?

These are some of the questions that animate the present thesis, which aims to consider how Foucault’s late work on the practices of the self, emerging out of a long engagement with his concepts of ‘power’ and ‘subjectivity’, can contribute to our understanding of the self-constitutive practices that are implied within the processual structure of computer games. In this introduction, I will set out some of the reasons for the significance of the work on the self, or self-constitution, in the present context. In short, self-formation appears essential towards realising freedom, and yet it is also strongly implicated in emerging forms of self-subjection. New technologies have always raised the prospect of fresh kinds of subjectivities, calling for appropriate means by which they are to be evaluated, and leading to debates that often veer towards the utopian or dystopian, into overly celebratory or condemnatory positions. These discussions give us an opportunity to re-assess our normative standards, which must be in some way attuned to, though perhaps also in some way autonomous from, the historical context in which they exist. This interplay, between the re-consideration of ethics, and the evaluation of new forms of technologically catalysed practices without resort to a dogmatic appeal to determinative standards, is one that is especially interesting when those practices intersect with a domain that has long been associated with our freedom and volition: play.

The main question at stake, which is whether the practices of the self that take place within the conditions set by computer games move us towards forms of refusing and transforming the self, and how to evaluate these transitions, is one that will be explored through a case study: The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006). It will be seen that the game suggests a calculative structure of anticipation and
deferral with respect to levelling-up, and that such a structure appears to sit ill with a Schillerian understanding of play mediating between our rational-sensuous natures. This kind of appeal to natures and faculties seems antithetical to Foucault’s ethico-aesthetic aims, but the thesis inspects a controversial reading of Foucault, which emphasises that he could not ultimately avoid recourse to a set of value-judgments which presupposes an ethical standard, albeit one that sought to refrain from being prescriptive. However, what eventually arises from this insight is the existence of a productive antinomy within this ethical ground, between the Apollonian move towards an ideal self and the Dionysian sundering of the self, which has implications for how we adjudge the practices of the self in computer games, as well as the basis on which the ethico-aesthetic task of self-transformation argued by Foucault must stand.

**The aesthetic practices of the self**

In one of Foucault’s last essays, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, he set out a schema for our self-transformation. Foucault re-examined his interest in a critical tradition that emerges from Kant’s work. The task of thought, for this tradition, is to question, criticise and transform fundamental features of the reality one inhabits. This places an expectation and indeed an onus on the individual to exhibit an active and transformative attitude. For Foucault (1984, p.35), Kant had described the state of affairs in his time as one where ‘man himself is responsible for his immature status. Thus it has to be supposed that he will be able to escape from it only by a change that he himself will bring about in himself’. Foucault (1984, pp.41-42) added that it is a state that has persisted through and beyond modernity, and that it is not simply a form of relationship to the present; it is:

also a mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself. The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism. To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration: what Baudelaire, in the vocabulary of his day, calls *dandysme*...Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his

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3 Timothy O’Leary (2002, p.166) translates this as one characterised by pursuing an ‘ontology of the present’ rather than an ‘analytics of truth’.
hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not “liberate man in his own being”; it compels him to face the task of producing himself.

He goes on to say that this attitude can be called a ‘critical ontology of ourselves’, that it is not a ‘theory’, ‘doctrine’, or ‘permanent body of knowledge’, but ‘an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them’ (Foucault, 1984b, p.50). It is not a discovery of what is fixed though hidden, but a self-invention that points towards something that violates the present reality following the very exercise of a scrupulous attentiveness to that reality. ‘Maybe the target nowadays’, as he wrote in ‘The Subject and Power’, ‘is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are…We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries’ (Foucault, 1982, p.216).

The reason for the question about the constitution of subjectivity, the very general enquiry into what it is that shapes subjectivity, and how it could be otherwise – for A rather than B to do the shaping, or even for the subject to determine themselves – is perhaps rooted in a deep-seated anxiety concerning the kind of subjects that we can be, as against the kind of subjects that we are, or in danger of becoming. This unease has been present ever since we adopted the individualising way of thinking that entails that ‘subjectivity’ as a concept per se, rather than even any particular instantiations of subjectivity germane to a place or time, underscores a state of contingency rather than necessity. Charles Taylor (1989) has shown the centrality of an ‘aesthetic expressivism’, which he traces to the eighteenth century, to the modern sense of self. The idea is that each individual is different and ought to live in a way that expresses this uniqueness; the aesthetic becomes the means by which this expression is achieved, since it surpasses mere imitation. Pippin (2005, p.307) frames this as a question about whether we are really or authentically who we are (or could be), and which ‘has been of central concern in a romantic strand of European and American philosophy running from Rousseau to Hegel, Emerson, Thoreau, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Sartre’. Modernity can be said to

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4 Even the so-called decentred, postmodern subject still arguably strives for the retrieval of a form of experience that escapes the instrumental relations of the world; what has changed in the last three-hundred years or so is that there has been a shift from the
be a precondition for this authenticity, or lack thereof, to be a source of anxiety insofar as it is arguably only with modernity that a unified self-critical subjectivity comes about, one that has the capacity to experience alienation from its own actions when it does not feel itself to have genuinely been the cause of the actions. This presumption may of course be disputed: perhaps modernity only imbues what was actually a perennial concern with a particular accentuation.

Foucault consistently revealed his position to be explicitly against a motivation for self-transformation from the pursuit of authenticity, which he saw as entrapping individuals into certain identities and thus thwarting our autonomy. However, it is not clear that it is possible to entirely circumvent a commitment to some final ground on which such a project must rest, as we will see. For him, the critical ontology of ourselves requires two related efforts: first, the ‘work on oneself’, and second, to ‘respond critically to one’s time’ (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1999, p.112); the second can be seen to shape the means and methods of the first, calling for an examination of power-knowledge. In ‘What is Enlightenment?’, the artist lauded by Baudelaire, Constantin Guys, was said by Foucault (1984, p.41) to have been a modern painter because he ‘transfigures’ the world. Foucault marks this ‘transfiguration’ as not an annulment of reality but as ‘a difficult interplay between the truth of what is real and the exercise of freedom; “natural” things become “more than natural,” “beautiful” things become “more than beautiful,” and individual objects appear “endowed with an impulsive life like the soul of [their] creator.”’(ibid., p.41). It is to imagine the present as otherwise than it is, and ‘to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is’. This ‘ironic heroization of the present’ (ibid., p.42) is what Baudelaire could not have imagined taking place in any other sphere than the one called art, and which Foucault extends to the realm of the self.

The way in which the individual was to take the initiative in terms of shaping themselves was the main focus of Foucault’s late work on the practices or techniques of the self, to which he turned to Greco-Roman antiquity. This called for the cultivation of a relation to self in which the self is neither given nor produced, but is continuously worked on in a labour of care (epimeleia) and skill (techne). For the ancients, the practices pertained to a form of mastery over oneself, so that one did not give in to one’s unruly desires and become a slave to them; one had to master oneself as a free (male) citizen

relation between self and nature to the self’s reflexive relation with itself (see: Taylor, 1989, pp.461-2).
before one could undertake the governing of others. It was these relations of self-mastery and self-knowledge that enabled individuals to transform their identity or to maintain it. Though not free in a totally unfettered sense, it did amount to an ‘arranging, embellishing and shaping of what is received from the past in a way that genuinely chooses between certain pre-given paths’ (Hutter, 2006, p.15). 

The ancient practices of the self involved exercises and practices, such as ‘abstinences, memorizations, examinations of conscience, meditations, silence, listening to others’, and ‘writing for oneself and others’ (Foucault, 1980a, p.364), and were ‘defined as primarily concrete techniques of self-fashioning, rather than as forms of self-representation or ideological images of the self’ (McNay, 1992, p.149). They were also ‘an analytical tool with which to interpret material practices’ (ibid.) and involved a merging of the theoretical with the material, which is suggested by the terms ‘techniques’ or ‘technologies’. Although they were consciously pursued insofar as one had set out on the project of self-stylisation, they have also been described as constituting ‘a primarily practical and intuitive knowledge, rather than a theoretical and critical knowledge’, which means that individuals may not be ‘aware of nor able to articulate the full implications or meaning of their practices’ (ibid., p.150). 

As Arnold Davidson (2005, p.126) puts it, Foucault’s concern with the self’s relationship to itself emerged at ‘the intersection of two themes that he had previously treated, namely, a history of subjectivity and an analysis of the forms of governmentality’. 5 This conceptualisation of ethics, as the self’s relationship to itself, emerging from the culmination of two major trajectories of his work, ‘provides us with a framework of enormous depth and subtlety’ (Davidson, 2005, p.130). 6 The use of this framework coincides with a shift in which the self’s role in constituting itself has come

5 In the first, unpublished version of the 1981 lecture, Foucault defined ‘governmentality’ as precisely the ‘surface of contact on which the way of conducting individuals and the way they conduct themselves are intertwined’ (Gros, 2001, p.548). In Security, Territory, Population, Foucault (2007, p.108) describes it to mean three things: first, ‘the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses, reflections, calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population’; second, ‘the tendency that, over a long period and throughout the West, has steadily led to the pre-eminence over all other forms (sovereignty, discipline and so on) of this type of power, which may be termed “government”’; third, it is the result of the process by which the state gradually ‘becomes governmentalized.’

6 Paul Veyne (1993, p.7) also highlights the potential within an approach, where ‘the self, taking itself as a work to be accomplished, could sustain an ethics that is no longer supported by either tradition or reason; as an artist of itself, the self would enjoy that autonomy that modernity can no longer do without’. 
to assume a newfound significance. In the context of his corpus, and of the three modes of ‘objectification’ which transform human beings into subjects, Foucault has stated that the third mode, or ‘subjectification’, which concerns the process of self-formation in which the person is active: the ‘way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject’ (Foucault, 1982, p.208), that it is becoming more prominent and that the implications of this have yet to be fully explored. There were new opportunities arising from the decline in the grand narratives of religion and politics, which has opened up a space for a modern aesthetics of existence; Foucault compared contemporary society with Greek culture in terms of the possibility for autonomous self-stylisation.

Refusing what we are requires knowing what we are

The interest in self-stylisation or self-formation seems particularly apt in the present climate of the humanities where a particular kind of subject has lately received the theoretical attention that attributes to it the status of being indicative of a key form of contemporary subjectivity: the new hypermodern, flexible, precarious, fluid, streamlined individual produced by ‘post-disciplinary’ technologies – the neoliberal subject – that is fashioned by more than merely the training and rendering docile of bodies, but by a mode of governmentality in which subjects must be fully involved in the activity that they are required to perform (Dardot & Laval, 2013; Wark, 2007; Dyer-Witheford & Peuter, 2009; Humphreys, 2008), or what Weber (1978) called ‘legitimate’ domination. This is a form of domination actively and willingly performed in different ways by each individual. The neoliberal subject in question, homo economicus, as Foucault noted, is a fundamentally different being to homo juridicus, or the legal subject of the state, structured by different motivations and governed by different principles (Read, 2009, pp.28-29). Rights, obligations and laws have been superceded by interest, investment and competition, driven by desires and aspirations, as the terms of the mode of governmentality. The connection with the ethico-aesthetic project of self-construction.

7 The first mode consisted in the modes of enquiry that try to give themselves the status of sciences; the second he called ‘dividing practices’; but it was the third that arguably ‘represents [Foucault’s] most original contribution’ (Rabinow, 1991 [1984], pp.10-11).
8 ‘I can’t help but think that discussion around a whole series of things…around certain forms of existence, rules of behaviour, etc., has been profoundly beneficial – the relation with the body, between man and woman, with sexuality’ (Foucault, 1988a, pp.49-50).
was perhaps most explicitly hinted at when Foucault (2008, p.226, emphasis added) declared that ‘homo economicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself’.9

At the core of this subject is the old search for (since modernity) authenticity and meaning, but which has come to take the present form of the imperative to realise oneself, to fulfil one’s potential through one’s work, which is more closely identified with the self. For Kirkpatrick (2015, p.7), referring to Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), this was born out of capitalism’s subsumption of the ‘artistic critique’, a shift in the 1960s and 70s that could be understood as a crisis of governmentality that was intertwined with a crisis in the forms of subjectivity that would accompany it; this has led to a situation where ‘the demand for authenticity…[leads to an] increase in paranoid behaviour by people who are forever fearful that they have been manipulated’.10 The crisis of the 60s and 70s was that of a yearning for more ‘playfulness’ and can be understood as a revivification of play since it had been downgraded in the age of industrial modernity (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p.4). People’s relationship to their work changed; they were no longer bound by the working day but felt that the work connected with them as individuals in a manner that had not been the case before. However, as we have seen, these gains, for Dardot and Laval (2013), were deemed to be largely illusory, and people still worked under competitive conditions for an organisation. Further, the anxiety of just being a cog in a machine may drive the individual to perform more efficiently in the quest for freedom, to (ironically) see themselves as ‘human capital’ to be indefinitely increased and to thereby desire the putative freedom of self-construction. That is to say, the contemporary subject seeks to embrace their individuality through work (and play) that reflects who they believe they genuinely are, which tends to be competitive and sought-after, and thereby calls for habitual sacrifice and exploitation. There is a mode of preparedness to work particularly hard at something deemed authentic or enjoyable. Yet this search for freedom is also often the very basis of the pervasive unfreedom.

9 Homo economicus is characterized as one who is ‘his own capital…his own producer…himself the source of earnings’ (Foucault, 2008, p.226).

10 The critique of capitalism culminated in the mass revolt against the Gaullist regime in May-June 1968. Whilst the ‘social critique’, associated with the labour movement, consisted of a refusal of egoism and a response to suffering, the ‘artistic critique’, with its more bohemian roots, was fuelled by a demand for liberation and a rejection of inauthenticity. It is the demands of this ‘artistic critique’ for freedom that flourished and propelled the shift towards a post-Fordist form of capital (Budgen, 2000, p.151).
Individuals have experienced losing a secure sense of self due to the breakdown of the social practices associated with traditional obligations that had once rooted them (Giddens, 1991). As Sherry Turkle (1995, p.255) notes, ‘[n]ot so long ago, stability was socially valued and culturally reinforced...What matters most now is the ability to adapt and change—to new jobs, new career directions, new gender roles, new technologies’. The multiplicity of disconnected relationships that exist in postmodernity ‘pull us in myriad directions, inviting us to play such a variety of roles that the very concept of an “authentic self” with knowable characteristics recedes from view’ (Gergen, 1991, p.7). It is also the case that individuals have a higher level of choice over matters of personal meaning, and that new technologies have enabled fresh opportunities for constructing and exploring the self (ibid.). For modern individuals, constructing and maintaining a stable identity has been an ongoing issue (Bauman, 1996). Most modern Western individuals still seek an idea of self that reflects unity and purpose, a cultural expectation that one’s identity reflects ‘a patterned and purposeful integration of the me’, ‘a developmental rhetoric in making sense of their own lives’ (McAdams, 1997, p.60; p.62), or ‘a patterned collection of social practices that constitute a sense of continuity and stability’ (Cote & Levine, 2002, p.28).

As we will see, the new opportunities for self-construction are indeed meaningful for neoliberal subjects because it mirrors not only an individualistic neoliberal ‘rationality’ (Dardot & Laval, 2013) that places the onus for change and responsibility on the self, and which arguably only permits self-construction within certain parameters, but also points to an excess to this that bodes the promise of freedom from this rationality, of fashioning the self as a work of art. As such, self-construction is doubly meaningful for contemporary subjects, reinforcing a dominant discourse of self-betterment as well as hinting at a genuinely recuperative and emancipatory function. To this end, I use the term ‘self-construction’ or ‘self-constitution’ in a neutral way, encompassing both this neoliberal self-fashioning and its adoption of self-creation and the realisation of one’s individuality as its ‘primary engine and product line’ (Nealon, 2008, p.13), as well as the ethico-aesthetic project of the refusal of the self, the artistic self-fashioning and transformation-transfiguration championed by Foucault.
The ambivalence of computer games

Although, in his comments concerning subjectification and new opportunities, Foucault did not have in mind anything quite as specific as the use of interactive digital culture or computer games by individuals, which have only come to dominate mainstream culture in the last few decades, he did have in mind a rather longer trajectory of the shift of the modalities of power that can be deemed consonant with these changes. The attitudes we have towards self-transformation cannot but be intertwined with the tools we have at our disposal and the environment that we inhabit. Digital technologies are such a prominent part of our lives that the ways in which we use new technologies seems second nature. Computer games have been at the vanguard of a shift in the use and availability of technology, having played an instrumental role in ‘introducing many people to computer technologies and in making the use of digital devices habitual and intuitive’ (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p.10). They consequently suggest themselves as tools of self-formation, but have mainly been considered in terms of the affordances they offer for the play with identities, for socialisation, or for the transgression of rules, rather than in terms of practices of the self that single-player games imply in relation to a critical ontology of ourselves.

Computer games have taken on the status of rather contentious and ambivalent object-processes in recent academic discussions that have brought out, among other issues, the limitations of both player-centric and game or text-centric approaches to comprehending them. But beyond sitting ill with more established modes of analysis, they have presented themselves, perhaps because of this very fact, as uniquely indicative of the contemporary period. Computer games have variously been described as a ‘paradigmatic media of Empire’ (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p.xv), as ‘allegories for our contemporary life under the protocological network of continuous informatics control’ (Galloway, 2006, p.106), and as ‘the best metaphor for contemporary culture’ (Kirkpatrick, 2008, p.127). ‘To a greater degree than perhaps any previous media other than the book’, Lister et al (2003, pp.xviii-ix) propose, ‘virtual games are a direct offshoot of their society’s main technology of production’, whilst Kline et al (2003) mark them as ‘the ideal commodity of post-Fordist capital’. Yet many commentators

11 From their origins in nuclear-age simulations, games have sprung from the machine system central to postwar capital’s power and profit – the computer’ (Lister, et al., 2003, pp.xviii-xix). Galloway (2004, p.35) has also remarked that computer games are ‘in direct synchronization with the political realities of the informatics age’.
are perhaps at their most insightful when they do not settle for a perspective that places computer games as being merely reflective of existing modes of production, structures of thought, or political realities, but see them as implicated in, or pioneering, a certain mode of being that has not yet been adequately conceptualised. As such, they present themselves as a promising lens with which to approach the question of the critical ontology of ourselves.

They presuppose a role for the player and cannot be realised without the player, and yet they boast an exhaustive system of non-negotiable rules and laws that the player usually only comes to learn and internalise, rather than modify. Kirkpatrick (2011) has asserted that the video game possesses an internal dissonance that sets it apart other things that we experience in consumer capitalism since it does not pacify but stimulates us into action, and we gain a sense of ourselves as providing the impetus and momentum to on-screen action. Yet games are obviously still mass-produced entertainment commodities. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009, p.228), writing about the political economy of games, conclude Games of Empire with the sentiment that:

All games of Empire are, it bears repeating, also games of multitude...To grasp this paradox, one might say that while games tend to a reactionary imperial content, as militarized, marketized, entertainment commodities, they also tend to a radical, multitudinous form, as collaborative, constructive, experimental digital productions. This schematization is approximate and simplified – but it points to the deep ambivalence of video game culture.

Computer games’ imbrication in the global market of mass-produced profit-making commodities indicates the array of obstacles that bedevil any attempt for games to be more than cynically made commodities. This tension means that ‘the video game is both autonomous in its inner dissonance and heteronomous in that it is almost emblematic of the logic of contemporary consumerism’ (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p.36, emphasis added). In the complexity of their forms, video games exceed mere repetitious consumption and achieve something like form, yet, as programmed and mechanical objects the forms they produce do not accommodate expressive meaning as part of their fibre (ibid., p.101). They are an aestheticised technology that ‘reminds us of, perhaps even taunts us with, the distance that still exists between technology and art, work and pleasure’ (Kirkpatrick, 2008, p.129). I propose that one of the reasons for their ambivalence is the way in
which their dynamic, processual structures invite responses from us that brings about an ambivalent array of practices which become sedimented in our modes of being.

A central problem or issue here is how we can make generalising claims about games at all given that they are by definition amenable to being played in different ways, that there is a labyrinth of possibilities. As Aarseth (1997) says, they are *ergodic*, requiring ‘non-trivial effort’ from us, and are multicursal labyrinths. The interactive, ergodic work is typically defined as generating multiple sequences of events so that what the interactor experiences is ‘one actualization among many potential routes within what we may call the event space of semio-logical possibility’ (Aarseth, 1999, p.32). As such, we experience the computer game as a process, knowing that things could have been otherwise, but also knowing that it exists as code, or as a series of possibilities many of which are exhaustible and able to be completely mapped. The ‘external’ process of a playthrough is but only one manifestation of the ‘internal’ algorithm. We feel like we have played ‘the game’, not just one version of the game, but know that there were other ways of playing. We can talk about what we shared with other players, but also recognise that the goals that we set ourselves led to a different experience from theirs.

If it is assumed that there is indeed a special proximity between computer games and the contemporary period, then the ambivalence within games will be in large part related to the conflictedness in the contemporary world and the operation of power within it. Contemporary capitalism can be said to be making more demands of its subjects. We now live in a world in which ‘we need to re-examine the division between public and private conduct in terms of historically variable strategies of discipline – even in so-called leisure’ (O’Neill, 1986, p.57). Modern organisations use ‘a much more liberal set of pressures’ given that they deal with individuals who have ‘already internalized a number of basic conformities’ (Crozier, 1964, p.184).

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12 This ‘experience’ of ‘one actualization’ is of a different order to the process of interpretation that takes place on the basis of and as a result of the sensory data; this point is covered by Aarseth’s (1997, p.3) by now well-known distinction between ‘variable expressiveness’ and ‘semantic ambiguity’.

13 Numerous studies (Chabot, 2012; Dardot & Laval, 2013; Lazzaroto, 2014; Sassen, 2008; Sennett, 2006) have suggested that contemporary capitalism is making more demands on its subjects, reaching into more dimensions of their existence – emotional, affective, and intimate – than in previous decades (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p.6).

14 As a result, ‘modern organizations can tolerate more deviance, restrict its requirement to a more specialized field, and demand only temporary commitments’ although direct coercion is ‘still in reserve as a last resort, but it is very rarely used, and people apparently no longer have to see it operate often to retain it in their calculations’ (ibid.,
Given that Foucault has shown that power in feudal societies was imprecise and unrefined in comparison to its operation in modern societies, where it can ‘circulate through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures, and all their daily actions’ (1980a, pp.151-2), then part of Foucault’s project can be seen as mapping how the refining of power leads to more precise ways in which subjectivity is constructed (see: Dews, 1984). His three volume history of sexuality can be read as, according to O’Leary (2002, p.84) ‘the story of the loss of our freedom’. The tensions between control and freedom can be positioned in the context of the decorporealisation of power and of its increasing intensity, lightness, and efficiency, which has had Foucault as its most insightful visionary, according to Jeffrey Nealon (2008, p.32). Power in modern societies is portrayed as essentially orientated towards the production of regimented, isolated, and self-policing subjects. Essentially, the turn to the self is fraught with dangers. Nealon (2008) alleges that the late Foucaultian turn to the self-creating subject reminds us of present-day American military recruitment posters (‘Become an Army of One’) and the corporate slogan of Microsoft (‘Where would you like to go today?’); artistic self-creation might once have been a source of resistance against the dominant culture of the ‘Moral Majority’ in the 1980s, but it is now ubiquitously familiar to us (ibid., p.11). It has become the very strategy of neoliberalism and been subsumed into ‘American-style neoliberalism’s primary engine and product line’ (ibid., p.13).

In their discussion of immaterial labor, Hardt and Negri (2000, p.329) have suggested that control of technical and cultural workers requires a situation where ‘discipline is not an external voice that dictates our practices...but rather something like an inner compulsion indistinguishable from our will’. Similarly, Lazzarato (1996, p.135) speaks of workplace situations where ‘the prescription and definition of tasks transform into a prescription of subjectivities’.

I would like to underscore the potential ambivalence in this teleological account of modern power. The idea of the growing efficiency of power has often been later framed not as a straightforward linear teleology towards increasing efficiency but as a dualism that has both opportunity and cost, being expressed, for example, in the discussions of ‘pharmacological’ dialectics (from the Greek word ‘pharmakon’, which carries the duality of meaning both ‘poison’ and ‘cure’ or ‘remedy’) in relation to Hardt and Negri’s theorisation of ‘Empire’s’ reliance on ‘immaterial labour’ and the new technologies that have the potential to be genuine tools of autonomy (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p.32) as well as more fine-grained perpetuations of control; the ‘multitude’, which refers to the new forms of subjectivity that is technologically astute and is simultaneously the engine and the antagonist of Empire (Hardt & Negri, 2000, pp.195-197). It is precisely because this system – capital – is expanding everywhere and has subsumed everything,
The rise in playful, customisable products since the 1980s has marked the turning of subversive subcultural energies into commodities. As Lev Manovich (2008, p.38), referring to Michel de Certeau’s distinction between tactics and strategies, puts it: when once ‘tactics’ had been unmappable due to their lack of a centralised structure or permanence, ‘the cultural tactics evolved by people were [now] turned into strategies now sold to them’. Customisability in order to signal a consumer’s individuality, it ought to be remembered, was spearheaded by the born digital industries. Computer games are something more than the new breed of physically customisable products. In the case of customisable Nike trainers, for example, where the consumer picks the design from a database of available options, the products come to have a configuration that once decided upon, can no longer be changed, and must be unique to the particular consumer. Yet given that the computer game reacts to how the player plays it, the same game can not only be a different product to different players, but can be different to the *same* player as that player’s practices change; this is a central facet of most games’ design that calls for considerations of player typologies, as we will see, and the design of gamic units that can appeal to more than one player type.17

that rebellion against it upsurges at many points. In fact, as Passavant (2004, p.3) summarises, Empire contains within itself the seeds of its own destruction: ‘the very conditions that define Empire will enable the possibility of its overthrow and the self-organization of democracy.’ ‘Immaterial labor’ is given as the qualitatively leading or hegemonic form of work in the global capitalism of Empire due to the way in which it plays a strategic role in the shaping of subjectivities, but it also creates new tools for autonomy, particularly through new media and communication technologies (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p.32). Computer games and the gaming industry form the epicentre of this ‘immaterial labor’; their pre-eminent position as ‘a paradigmatic media of Empire’ (ibid. p.xv) means that they offer, in accordance with this way of thinking, the potential to both produce subjectivities in accordance with Empire, as well as subversive subjectivities that counter it. It is productive to think of Empire as having no control centre, but rather dominant constituent forces or ‘rationalities’ (Munro, 2002, p.180).

On this point, normalisation that advances under the guise of diversity, or that uses the appeal of expressing of one’s individuality, ought to be identified whilst also bearing in mind that its identification will ultimately be entwined with the issue of whether we have foregrounded systematising or anti-systematising forms of thinking, which look for, and find, the very homogeneity or heterogeneity that they seek. Whichever we choose to privilege – the general or the particular, the homogeneous or the heterogeneous – speaks about our own attitudes as to whether we find the accompanying normalising control or opportunities for spontaneous freedom, and as such ought to be addressed with a dimension of self-reflexivity. This tension echoes the logic of capitalism, which, as Jameson (1988, p.52) writes, is that of a force which ‘operates uniformly over everything and makes heterogeneity a homogenous and standardizing power’. As we will see, Foucault used genealogy to underscore the
Practices, patterns, and ethoi

In *The Interface Effect*, Alexander Galloway (2012, p.22) argues that ‘the computer instantiates a practice not a presence, an effect not an object’, which is to say, after drawing the distinction between ‘an ethic’, which describes general principles for practice, and ‘the realm of the ethical’, which does so within the context of a human relationship to moral conceptions of the good, that ‘the computer is, in general, an ethic’. Given that the computer is about possibility and definition, Galloway thinks that it is dubious to define it ontologically. By this, I take him to mean a definition that implies a fixity that is hostile to its branching potentials. As he puts it:

…if the computer might better be understood in terms of a practice or a set of executions or actions in relation to a world, the proper branch of philosophy that one should turn to is ethics of pragmatics, not ontology or metaphysics; as an ethics, the computer takes our execution of the world as the condition of the world’s expression. (Galloway, 2012, p.23).

Galloway (2012, p.24) deems formalist approaches, such as Lev Manovich’s in *The Language of New Media*, which pivots on the premise that new media may be defined via reference to a foundational set of formal qualities, to have unappetising conclusions insofar as they contain ‘no injunction’. If there is a language of new media, and it is really an executable language and not simply a natural one, then one’s critical appraisal has to be in step with that notion of executability. Thus, he argues that it is through a discourse in terms of an ethics, one that also fulfils various ethical and political expectations (this may be called a politics), that we should understand computers. In heterogeneity within homogeneity, and to bring out the possibilities for change, but he also advocated grids of intelligibility, such as the modern, disciplinary or biopolitical apparatus of power, which were inferred through congregating micro-reactions together. 18 In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle (1976, p.1103a14) pointed out that the Greek term for ‘character’, ethos, is closely related to the term for custom or habit. As such, one’s moral character was seen to be the product of the cultivation of the right personal habits and customs. This encapsulated, for Foucault, the approach to ethics not via a normatively grounded code of behaviour, but via an uncodifiable general outlook or attitude that one worked on through one’s life. The computer, or computer games as an ethic refers to their role in the cultivation of our habits.

19 It has not been shown, however, that it is impossible that an approach from ontology cannot be sufficiently sophisticated to account for ‘executability’ and different forms of non-determining suggestion, or that it is necessarily politically silent. However, I take
In this way, the political task is to think about the nature of the ethic contained within computer games, rather than the more politically silent issue of their ontology, where ‘ontology’ signifies an approach fixated on the stale dissection of their formal features.

This accords with my aim to think in terms of the self-practices that they induce. Computer games are symptomatic of what has been called ‘ludic capitalism’, which denotes ‘a new socio-economic landscape, one in which flexibility, play, creativity, and immaterial labour…have taken over from the old concepts of discipline, hierarchy, bureaucracy, and muscle’ (ibid., p.27). That computer games have become less ‘disciplinary’ has been an outcome of a dovetailing between, in particular, their increasing technological sophistication, which affords players a greater range of possible outcomes and starting scenarios, and the ideology that drives their design and consumption, which is fixated on a rhetorics of freedom and choice. The marketing blurb for one of the most iconic single-player RPGs made, The Elder Scrolls IV: Skyrim (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), for example, tells players of ‘a complete virtual world open for you to explore any way you choose…The legendary freedom of choice, storytelling, and adventure of The Elder Scrolls is realized like never before… The new character system allows you to play any way you want’ (Bethesda Softworks LLC, 2011).

The historical techniques of self-formation studied by Foucault characteristically entailed a process of self-understanding through the mediation of an external authority figure, such as a confessor or psychoanalyst (Rabinow, 1991 [1984]). Subjectification took place at certain sites, such as the confessional booth or the psychoanalyst’s office, whilst the ancient Greeks enjoyed ‘soul schools’. In the course of gameplay, on the other hand, we often do not consciously set out to transform ourselves or our relationship to self, as we might do in the course of a spiritual confession or in relation to the ancient attitude towards epimeleia heateau. We are not in the habit of attempting to make profound statements about ourselves that bear on our souls, and nor are we in the presence of an authority figure who is keen to examine the minutiae of our lives and thoughts. It is, after all, ‘just a game’. With the play practices of many gamer cultures,

Galloway’s comments here to gesture towards a general tendency within what he calls the approach from ontology.

20 It is worth noting that the kinds of statements that we make to others to explain our gameplaying, and even as inner monologue, frequently include quite unguarded declarations about ourselves, our perceptions of our own abilities, and our efforts: ‘Yes! I am good at this part!’ ‘If only I still had that aqua-shield, this part would be easy’; ‘I am such an idiot — I should have known that you could do that’; ‘I am just not fast enough to dodge those attacks’ etc.
or with the game’s rhetoric itself, there is typically no culture of recognising, as there was with the ascetic practices in Classical Athens, that it was a question of ‘showing oneself to be stronger than one’s unruly passions’, or in late antiquity, when it was a question of ‘recognising that one was sick, and that philosophy offered the best cure’ (O’Leary, 2002, p.74). With computer game play, there is often no more an objective than to do well and have fun in the course of playing. In this sense, there is, *prima facie*, a comparative lack of self-reflexivity and the conscious work on the self.

Nevertheless, in single-player games, the relation between individual and the computer that mediates their experience of the computer game that sets challenges and imparts rewards is the site of a growing proportion of our private leisure time, and for many constitutes a core part of their identity. Leisure often comes to assume a significance over and above time spent frivolously; it is associated with personal goals, challenge, and self-growth. Individuals may come to attribute to their leisure experiences a degree of psychological continuity as the ground on which to think their own identity. Indeed, ‘[i]f leisure is to become, for many, an improvement over work as a way of finding personal fulfilment, identity enhancement, self-expression, and the like, then people must be careful to adopt those forms returning the greatest payoff’ (Stebbins, 1982, p.267). Players’ self-set goals, insofar as we might try and attribute a coherence and consistency to them, will depend upon some of the reasons that players give themselves for playing. The desire to escape from ‘real-life’ anomie, for example, might be satisfied by the very act of playing, and so not affect one’s in-game decisions *per se*, whilst efforts at ‘self-actualisation’ (Maslow, 1968) through gameplay are likely to require some degree of mastery and a serious approach to learning all the strictures of the game’s rules – this will then influence the player’s ‘playstyle’. It should also be remembered that play is potentially a means of self-growth given that Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) much-cited concept of ‘flow’ was articulated as such a vehicle: ‘following a flow experience, the organization of the self is more complex than it had been before’, and it

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21 This is not to say that there are significant variances in the attitudes with which different groups of gamers approach the activity, but it is a comment on the lack of seriousness that has been culturally attached to the computer game form. Games have promised to change us, or to reveal things to us about ourselves, but the lack of seriousness that we associate with games is transmitted to such claims and efforts. Kirkpatrick (2013) points out that Dr Kawashima’s *Brain Age: Train Your Brain in Minutes a Day!* (Nintendo SPD, 2005) promises to change us, or at least our brain age, whilst other games promise to present us with ethical decisions that bring out what kind of individual we would be in a fictional world, but that they also purport to be just ‘play’, where the subject can explore the boundaries of the self without consequences.
is ‘by becoming increasingly complex that the self might be said to grow’ (ibid., p.41). As such, they are now more about (and give the appearance of being so) our relations to ourselves, or to the tasks that we set ourselves when we play them. The voluntariness of the play, together with the way in which the game’s rules are progressively discovered, means that games come to impose an obligation on the player through a non-coercive ‘truth’ that is felt ethopoetically, of the player’s own accord, and to which he or she submits given that it is ‘true’ (Foucault, 2012, pp.95-96).

The range of possible play styles or approaches within a game complicates the issue of what is involved, and how to articulate it. They foster many possibilities that can be completely different games to different players, and are often designed as such. It would be a mistake, however, to latch onto this aspect of their multiplicity too fervently, for it would deny us from making the sorts of analyses that will elucidate their ethic in the context of systematic shifts in the modalities of power. Even if they do not dictate to us what to do, do they facilitate in us what Foucault called the capacity to ‘think otherwise’ (Foucault, 1988 [1984], p.9), or encourage the genuine kind of ‘ascesis’ or austere self-mastery that he lauded as the means by which to realise freedom? What are involved are the *patterns* of action with which the player engages, and it is these patterns that have a complex connection with the relation to self. Albert Borgmann (1984, p.208), in writing about what he called ‘focal practices’, which are practices that allow us to centre our lives (as opposed to those that debilitate and scatter our attention), proposed that:

> the peril of technology lies not in this or that of its manifestations but in the pervasiveness and consistency of its pattern...the more evident it becomes to us that technology must be countered by an equally patterned social commitment, i.e., by a practice.

Patterns of action will receive more attention in chapter three, where I will briefly discuss the relation between competence, disposition, action, and ethos that is presumed by the Foucauldian approach. In particular, Foucault’s conception of the practices of the self is understood to reveal a form of self-understanding that is immanent to the actions or practices themselves, as showing the disposition of the subject of the actions. On this purview, computer games induce not just actions, but patterns of actions, which are relations to the self, and which bring us to, and solidify,
certain modes of relation to self. Once these modes have been articulated, it will be possible to disambiguate between the way in which computer games conjoin with our pre-existing dispositions to bind us to subjectivities that facilitate the operation of power, or ones that invite us to wander from ourselves, and to transform or transfigure what we are.

**Thesis outline**

Chapter one introduces Foucault’s turn to the aesthetic practices of the self, which is a transition that sees him steer a course between the subject being determined by power-knowledge on the one hand, and being self-determining on the other. Using his conception of the subject refusing or wandering away from forms of individualisation imposed by the state, the question is whether computer games facilitate this through the forms of self-constitution or self-set patterns of action that they suggest. The further question to this ethics of wandering away or negation is to consider these practices and subjectivities in light of a non-determining ethico-aesthetic standard that is capable of distinguishing between the liberatory and the pernicious, and which is hinted at in Foucault’s references to the body and his reading of ancient Greco-Roman practices of the self, as well as in his invocation of a concept of ‘truth.’ This standard appears to call for us to surpass ourselves through ascetic practices, and for us to seemingly reach a state that is not defined by our individuality. The contrast with the practices of the self that move us towards freedom may be a type of neoliberal self-fashioning, which binds us to aspire to an ideal entrepreneurial self that may ultimately be destructive to us; the ambivalence of self-constitution refers to the possibility of the work on the self to culminate in one of these two termini.

Chapter two reviews some of the existing literature on computer games and their role in the constitution of subjectivities. I reject the idea that they produce discrete subjectivities dictated by the needs of an overarching system of power by progressively moving towards the idea that we constitute ourselves through our gameplaying. In particular, we are drawn into an heuristic circle of learning and gameplay, which depends on our own hypothesising, involving affirmations or refutations, to cognitively map the game and to identify with a process rather than with a role. The impetus to do so comes from ourselves, and what results is a circular process of self-constitution. This
is not to forget that such a process has its constraints, but that the active relationship to ‘truth,’ which is particularly brought out by the labyrinthine possibilities in contemporary computer games, is crucial to the isomorphism between the structure of computer games and that of contemporary power, in the way in which a certain disposition or ethos is brought about in us through our interaction with the structures, but is by no means determined by it.

Chapter three brings out the necessity of turning to Foucault’s tripartite analysis of power-knowledge-subject in the analysis of how games foster or catalyse certain practices of the self, given that self-constitution is by no means an unfettered process. That is to say, it expands upon the issue of how to identify the constraints within game structures. The desired bridging between game-centric and player-centric disciplinary approaches that is of interest to Espen Aarseth and Miguel Sicart reveals an existing gap in academic writing about computer games that seeks to take into account the non-determining, but non-neutral structures in games as they inform our self-practices. The chapter suggests how to consider this, the ‘rationality’ of a game, through inferring homogeneous elements between various presumed player placeholders or typologies, which aims to illuminate but not disentangle the questions of power and the subject. In this way, generalising claims may be advanced about computer games whilst acknowledging that they may be played in very different ways by different players, and on the bases of the reflexive qualifications attached to this approach.

Chapter four then applies the insights of chapter three to a computer game case study: levelling-up in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. From the ambivalent ascetic patterns of action of six player typologies, the chapter considers their various relations to self, to the hypothetical ‘moral code’ of playing well or doing well in the game. There are some comparisons between the practices attributed to these player-types and those suggested by Foucault’s reading of ancient ethics, which were aimed at effecting a movement beyond the self. It is concluded that the structure of calculative anticipation and deferral is common to four or five of the six typologies posited for *Oblivion*, and that this anticipatory deferral can be deemed a ‘rationality’ that exists within the game, as well as having some applicability beyond it.

In chapter five, the analysis of the anticipation and deferral arising from chapter four leads to a broader consideration of rationality in the search for the means to disambiguate between positive and pernicious self-practices. I argue that there can be no profitable turn away from instrumental rationality, from the reflective unity of self
that constitutes subjectivity. Instead, the practices of the self that lead to a surpassing of the self indicated by ancient ethics requires a balance between, drawing on the aesthetic theory of Schiller, reason and sense. On this basis, an excessive proportion of calculative reason leads to the kind of ends-orientated neoliberal self-fashioning that is destructive, in contrast to the purposeless dandyism that results from an excess of sense. This argument relies on there being capacities within us that are at least semi-autonomous from the material context with which to decide this balance, which brings us back to the issue of embodied rationality. Some potential criticisms of this view are examined, as well as the possibility that the capacities are social, rather than transcendental. Following from this, it is seen that Foucault’s ethical foundations weaves a line between Dionysian disarticulation and Apollonian normativism, and it is this insight which coalesces the considerations that have been traced in the thesis about the entanglement between the question of the ethical foundation of an ethico-aesthetic project, and the ambivalent nature of self-constitution in a medium that bears a special relation to the contemporary period. That is to say, the task is to move towards an ethical standard as we adjudge the conjunction between power and subject in computer games, as well as to move away from one.

**Some preliminary qualifications**

There has been little consensus on a uniform use of terms, as ‘digital games,’ ‘electronic games,’ and ‘computer games’ have been employed somewhat interchangeably (Perron & Wolf, 2009, pp.6-8). Leslie Haddon (1993) has used the term ‘interactive games’ to denote what we conventionally call both ‘computer games’ and ‘videogames’, which he has in turn differentiated by turning to early game history. ‘Videogames’, for him, referred to arcade machines or to early dedicated consoles, on which only designated games could be played, whereas the early home computer was more multitudinous in its function, being used by those who had programming know-how; the keen player/programmer could intervene into the code of the home computer game (Haddon, 1992, p.89). However, Aphra Kerr (2006) has noted that games on PCs, arcade machines, and consoles have all been referred to as ‘video games’ by various subsequent commentators, including Poole (2000, p.35), Herz (1997) and Wolf (2001, p.17). ‘Digital games’ is perhaps now deemed to be the most all-encompassing term,
encapsulating the gamut of computer, console, handheld, mobile phone and arcade games. The influential journal ‘Game Studies’, on the other hand, describes itself as ‘the international journal of computer game research’ (emphasis added). I will use the term ‘computer games’ throughout this thesis to refer to all of the terms above, since we play the objects in question on computers and there is arguably something key about the affinity between computers and games (Juul, 2003).

There are, of course, unavoidable questions about the valid scope of employing terms like ‘computer games’ to encompass cathode ray tube era games like Pong within the same conceptual bracket as Microsoft Kinect games such as Kinectimals, or whether the complex branching choices in an emergent, procedurally generated games like Civilization V can be compared to the minimal and ultimately non-consequential ‘choices’ offered in something like Dinner Date (2011). Computer games have always been subject to rapid changes, which adds another factor to their resistance to discussions in general terms. At some point, these incremental developments will have led to something that is not what is thought or imagined today to be a computer game, just as the nascent entertainment machines that arose to serve industrialised free time, and which preceded computer games, were not computer games.

My approach in this thesis will be to largely bracket the complexities pertaining to the ontological definition or categorisation of computer games: I propose to approach them in terms of the rather general and abstract qualities of their formal, processual structures as they give rise to various player practices, and are understood to be ‘rationalities’ that make some practices more likely to occur than others given a range of player dispositions. I will eschew emphases on aspects that can be confined to any one genre, although the central case study will be of an RPG. This is a contentious position insofar as it will become increasingly less de rigueur to discuss computer games as a medium about which we can make claims that can potentially encompass all its genres.

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22 The Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA), formed in 2003 is dedicated to the study of all such games. ‘Interactive’ is now generally deemed to be too contentious a term, being thought unable to distinguish the digital from the non-digital, or to differentiate between degrees of the kinds of physical or mental acts that are required, demanded, fostered.

23 Nietzsche’s (1989, p.80) warning that ‘only that which has no history is definable’, speaks lucidly against the usefulness of clear-cut or easy definitions, but particularly so in the case of a medium tethered so tightly to technological development, celebrating the new possibilities heralded by greater processing power or finer graphics. David Sudnow (1983, p.8) has pointed out that Atari chose to call its products ‘video games’ only in order to avoid problems with the Food and Drug Administration.
and instantiations; this is in step with the shift in academic attention on them away from their newness and ontology onto the study of particular genres and player groups. Though there may be some reasons to welcome this, there will also be an accompanying loss to this move, which is that of an altogether more speculative and holistic mode of enquiry.

There are some further restrictions in effect. Firstly, this thesis limits the issue of the practices of the self to single-player games, rather than to gamers’ involvements in the extended domain of game cultures, player-to-player communication, social groups and organisations, events and competitions, etc. There is a core to the cybernetic relationship between player and game that can be analysed independently; this is in order to consider the practices of the self that are implied in the game itself, as it comes into conjunction with the disposition of a player. Single-player games offer a means for the relationship between the player and the materiality of the game to be scrutinised without the further complicating considerations of, first, a dimension of social interaction that influences or even dictates how a player negotiates the game, and second, that of the potentially unpredictable actions of other players in the game world who do not follow programmed modes of behaviour or pre-set probabilities. That is to say, every gamific outcome in a single-player game is the product of the entanglement between the actions of the player and the programming of the game, tempered only by the culture of engagement and consumption that exists (the mediation of players by other players through walkthrough guides that the former have read, for example

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24 With regard to the practices of the self, it would indeed have been interesting to investigate a gamer culture that would ‘invent modes of relationships, modes of existence, types of value and forms of exchange between individuals which would be really new, which would be neither homogenous with nor super-imposable on general cultural relations’ (Foucault, cited in O’Leary, p.163). Clearly, the relation to self is for many developed through the pleasures of team play, social interaction, and involvement in a community (Taylor, 2003).

25 The designation ‘single-player’ game is, however, arguably an archaic one; games used to be and still are labelled as one-player, single-player, two-player, 4-player etc. Yet when games intersect with social media, or location-based apps, it is difficult to know whether the games of the future, and players’ tastes, will render these distinctions, if not completely redundant, then consigned to the realm of retro-gaming.

26 Any categorical distinction between single-player and multi-player games will not be uncontroversial, especially given the fact that many games feature both modes, and may offer the same levels or gameplay space to be taken on alone or with one or more partners temporarily (e.g. the Dark Souls series), or throughout the entirety of the game.
In this respect, when the player is self-reflexive about their own play, we need primarily consider that entanglement, which affords us a certain degree of diagnostic power with regard to the ‘rationality’ of the game itself. By focusing on single-player games, the motivation is to get at this ‘core’ self-relation, which also subsists in multi-player games but is inflected by an array of additional considerations. This is not to say that those considerations are simply appended onto the ‘core’; the particular balance and interaction between them is context-dependent and context-sensitive, but there is, in any case, inadequate scope to address them in this thesis.

Secondly, it needs to be acknowledged that the opportunities for self-construction are made most possible by the kind of game that abets the player’s development of a style, such as the way in which they level their character and outfit him or her; the way in which they construct a city or empire; the way in which they develop a style of play, be it methodical and precise, or intense and intuitive. All of this presupposes a certain complexity in the games themselves. I do not make declarations that these are confined to only some genres if only because many games, from RPGs to strategy to action-shooters, are sufficiently complex to enable for an individual’s playing style to be distinguishable. It may be that even a minimalist kinaesthetic game like *Pong* (Atari, 1972) allows for a style to manifest to some extent, rather than just doing well under the game’s conditions, but the distinction being one of degree does not dispute the fact that there is generally a greater range of non-essential choices within contemporary games.

Thirdly, viewing the practices of the self as principally ‘concrete techniques of self-fashioning, rather than as forms of self-representation or ideological images of the self’ (McNay, 1992, p.149), I do not focus on a self-imposed ‘gamer’ identity. Nor am I

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27 The various forms of player behaviour that the rules may trigger, which impacts upon further behaviour, is not contained in the rules themselves (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p.160). Nevertheless, the extent of these patterns of behaviour may be foreseeable, or bear a relationship to the rules that is definable in terms of another kind of meta-logic or rationale.

28 It is to reduce, as it were, what Steinkuehler (2006) has described as the ‘mangle of play’, the way in which the game that is played is the outcome of a ‘mangle’ of various forces, including player and developer intentions, logics of production and consumption, the material constraints and affordances of the game, broader social norms and etiquette, etc.

29 There has been some work on the reflexive relation to self of those who play computer games. Not everyone who plays computer games identifies as a ‘gamer’ (Shaw, 2011). Shaw argues that ‘[h]ow people identify as gamers, is a different question from who counts as a gamer’ (ibid., p.29). Citing Hall (1966), she notes that ‘identification
concerned, in this thesis, with the connection between what has been called ‘identity play’ in a semiotic world and the constitution of player subjectivities, which has received a great deal of attention in game studies. The enthusiasm and associated politics attached to being able to ‘float free of biological and sociocultural determinants’ and of leaving bodies behind in ‘incorporeal interaction’ (Dery, 1994, p.3) has been much explored since the cyberculture studies of the nineties. Krzywinska (2007, p.117) reminds us that whatever transformational elements there are in a game are not confined to identity play:

Identity play is only one aspect [of World of Warcraft], however, and for many it tends to tail off after a while as it is harder to maintain the more you play. Transformational elements do not simply operate in terms of identity play; becoming more skilled at playing the game, making for a greater sense of agency and acting as an apparent foil to the forces of determination, is also a form of pleasure-generating transformation.

The practices of the self linked to gameplay come from one’s experimental attitude, from one’s willingness to abide by and deviate from perceived norms or goals as evidenced in the patterns of one’s ascetic practices. It is about the trajectories taken through the course of a game, the repetitions, doubling back, restarts, and so on. These are processes that are to be understood, on a Foucauldian framework, not by reference to the subject’s subjective interpretations or meanings, but against the context of a system of thought and modality of power.

allows for the self-definition of the individual, rather than on static definitions of identity applied from the outside’ (ibid., pp.29-30). In this thesis, given that the practices of the self are not primarily about self-representation, I use the terms ‘player’ and ‘gamer’ interchangeably to denote anyone who plays computer games without evoking any of the cultural connotations associated with the term ‘gamer’.

As such, I do not deal with the computer game as a semiotic universe in which all the representations, such as architectural styles, flora and fauna, clothing and armour, are saturated with meaning. Whilst recognising that the separation between the procedural, narrative, and semiotic elements of a game may be a blurred one, I take the line, pace Kirkpatrick (2011, p.194), that viewing ‘all cultural objects as texts or component elements of discourses that contributes to the reproduction of identities, is misapplied to video games insofar as the meanings of games tends to be obscure’.
Chapter one

The work on the self

Perhaps the most far-reaching question raised by the claims made for the practices of the self is the one about the foundations of critique itself. What has to be supposed in order for us to be able to transform ourselves, and to distinguish between beneficial and pernicious practices of transformation? I advance the controversial argument that in his reading of the practices of Greco-Roman Antiquity, as well as in other writings, Foucault draws upon a set of values that appear to have to originate from within us, given that they cannot be imposed from the outside, and with which a connection may be drawn with regards to his writings on the ‘body.’ There is something beyond the flux of historical change and analyses from the perspective of historical contingency, though it need not be transcendental; the ambiguous invocations of a concept of ‘truth’ in his late work can be seen to evidence this. This reading appears to run against the tenor of his entire oeuvre, but its significance lies in its manifesting even in relation to a thinker so hostile to the idea of the transcendental. The movement beyond the self, from a personal individualism, to an impersonal holism, which secures the practices of the self as oriented towards freedom, and which he lauded in the ancient practices, does seem to call for some such commitments. Further, such commitments constitute an arguably indispensable assumption in his exhortations for us to struggle. The implications of this examination of the ethical grounds upon which the claims of the practices of the self rest will be considered in chapter five, in order to draw out the problematics that are involved in our attempts to disambiguate between forms of self-practice, and will eventually lead to the concretisation of a series of considerations that are essential to how we can conceive of self-constitution in computer games along ethico-aesthetic lines.
Foucault and the refusal of who we are

Towards the end of his work, Foucault (1982, p.209) boldly claimed that ‘it is not power, but the subject, which is the general theme of my research’. Whilst some commentators have expressed unease with interpretations of Foucault that do not foreground the ‘specificity’ and ‘marginality’ of his writing (Gutting, 2007, p.3) over the development of a single method or philosophical insight, to fail to recognise his propensity for new beginnings, there can be no doubt that his theorisation of ‘the subject’ was central to his oeuvre, and has come to exert considerable influence on the humanities and social sciences (Lloyd & Thacker, 1997). 31

In ‘The Subject and Power’, Foucault contrasts the ‘subject’ with the ‘individual’; the ‘subject’ is what is created when a form of ‘power’ applies itself to the ‘individual’. That power ‘marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects’ (Foucault, 1982, p.212). Foucault then goes on to say that there are two meanings of the word ‘subject’: the first is being ‘subject’ to someone else ‘by control and dependence’, and the second is ‘tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge’ (ibid.). Both meanings, therefore, refer to a subjugation of the subject to power. This subjugation was not presented in neutral terms, but as something to be struggled against. Indeed, it is a struggle that Foucault thought was becoming ‘more and more important’ (ibid., p.213) due to the fact that ever since the sixteenth century, ‘the state’, as a new political structure, has been functioning and continuously developing as ‘a modern matrix of individualization, or a new form of pastoral power’ (ibid., p.215). Foucault declared, in a now much-cited passage, that:

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political “double bind,” which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures. The conclusion would be that the

31 O’Leary’s (2002) characterisation, a not unusual one amongst Foucauldean scholars, is that Foucault’s early work deals with the discursive production of knowledge; his middle work is concerned with interconnections between knowledge and power; and his later work delves into the question of subjectivity, particularly the self’s relation to the self.
political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries. (ibid., p.216).

Thus, Foucault calls for the rejection of the type of individualisation that is linked to the state.\textsuperscript{32} Foucault argues that our contemporary forms of individuality stem from a technology of the self which arose out of early Christianity, underwent further development in the early modern period and eventually took on its ‘governmentalized’ form in the modern state. This subject is ‘nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built into our history’ (Foucault, 1993, p.222), and which can be refused.

In \textit{The History of Sexuality}, Foucault stated that since the eighteenth century, power has come to be a ‘life-administering’ force: it no longer operates by ‘deduction’ but by ‘addition’ and augmentation. It has become a ‘positive influence on life’, one that ‘endeavours to administer, optimize and multiply it,’ but all within an orientation towards ‘subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations’ (Foucault, 1987 [1976], p.137).\textsuperscript{33} This apparatus of life-administering ‘bio-power’ he connected with the construction of subjectivity, particularly with the importance of sexuality and the manner in which subjects come to construct themselves through their sexuality.\textsuperscript{34}

What is most relevant for the hope for ‘new forms of subjectivity’, is the nature and

\textsuperscript{32} Elsewhere, he endeavours to show that the genealogical method reveals the subject to be only the product of historically contingent conditions and cannot consequently lay claim to any grounds of inviolable necessity: ‘[o]ne has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that’s to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to a field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history’ (Foucault, 1980a, p.117).

\textsuperscript{33} Before the eighteenth century, he argues, power operated negatively, by deduction: it was characterised by the sovereign’s right to take life (a right whose contrary was not the right to give life but merely to let live); it was, ‘essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself’ (Foucault, 1987 [1976], p.136).

\textsuperscript{34} And it is within the context of these controls that sexuality takes on its modern importance, because it comes to be situated at the intersection of the two axes along which bio-power operates: that of the ‘anatamo-politics of the human body’ (the disciplines) and the ‘biopolitics of the population’ (O’Leary, 2002, p.29).
scope of the remedy that Foucault prescribes. Foucault’s diagnosis of the reason that ‘we are all living more or less in a state of sexual misery’ (Foucault, 1990b [1984], p.112) was arguably not due to any particular social or psychological repression, but to the way in which sexuality is produced through the exercise of power. That particular exercise of power, or mechanism, could only be effectively undermined through a categorical and unbridled rejection of the whole ‘sexography’ (Foucault, 1990, p.116); as O’Leary (2002, p.24) puts it, ‘saying ‘no’ to repression in favour of the liberation of sexuality, or overcoming repression by interrogating and speaking one’s sexuality, is simply to remain within that same mechanism which makes one suffer’. That there is a remedy means, by extension, that the rejection of the whole ‘sexography’ is in principle not only desirable, but also possible.

Yet what is exactly entailed by the political, ethical, social and philosophical task of ‘refusal’, and the extent of possibility to which we can renounce our subjugation to power is a question that continues to preoccupy us even as recent scholarship on Foucault both points to the limitations of applying his theoretical frameworks, which were constructed with disciplinary societies in mind, to the contemporary globalised world of neoliberal capital, as well as also to the need to extend and preserve his insights (Fraser, 2003).

Foucault’s aim can broadly be said to have been to foreground the ‘lines of fragility’ (1990 [1983], p.36) that run through our forms of subjectivity as a means of getting rid of the subject itself and in order to ‘open up the space of freedom...of possible transformation’ (ibid.). In a similar vein, his deployment of what he called ‘événementalisation’, or ‘eventalisation’ (Foucault, 1996, p.393), was a methodological tool that consisted of an approach to history which emphasised the impermanence of what appeared to be universal necessities at particular historical moments, the purpose of this being to rebut the resignation that things could not have been otherwise. We

35 Recognising a self that is presented to oneself through the normative categories of psychological and psychoanalytic science is, for Foucault, ‘an event of supreme political importance because this victimization fashions the potentially transgressive dimension of the person into yet another element of the disciplinary matrix that Discipline and Punish described as the carceral archipelago’ (Bernauer & Mahon, 2005, p.159).

36 Nealon (2008, pp.81-82), however, has argued that ‘whereas Foucault never had the chance to analyze the mode of power known as contemporary globalization, the work he left behind offers us a number of crucial tools for thinking through “today” – for diagnosing and responding to this new mode of power’.

37 The work of thought is not to denounce the evil which, supposedly, secretly inhabits everything that exists; but to see in advance the danger which threatens in everything
can understand this in relation to the critical ontology of ourselves, as the historical analysis of the present for the purposes of understanding the fragility of the limits imposed on us such that we may go beyond them.

An ethics that was an aesthetics of existence

In *Foucault and the Art of Ethics*, Timothy O'Leary (2002) argues that the very starting point for a Foucauldian ethics is the refusal of the self and the rejection of those forms of identity to which we are tied, not only by the institutions and practices of our society, but also by ourselves.\(^\text{38}\) To this end, Foucault envisaged an aesthetic attitude towards the self that could realise this project of freedom. It was an attitude of continuous self-transformation based on the thinking that the subject is *not* an unalterable substance but rather a ‘form’ that is capable of transformation (Foucault, 1987 [1984], p.121). One of the ways in which the transformation could be achieved was through the exercise of certain arts or practices upon the self, although they were by no means systematised by Foucault; James Bernauer (1990, p.19) has characterised the genealogical method as apt to realising the self-transformation called for by Foucauldian ethics, whilst Paul Rabinow (1997, pp.xxxiii-xxxvi) sought to extend it to critical activity in general. These transformative practices have been called ‘the practices of the self’, or ‘the care of the self’. What was involved was the cultivation of a relation to self in which the self is neither given nor produced, but is continuously worked on in a labour of care (*epimeleia*) that is habitual, and to render problematic everything that is solid’ (Foucault, 1994, p.612).

\(^{38}\) This opposition notably extended to dominant philosophical approaches to the self – his rejection of the ‘hermeneutics of the self’. At the Howison Lectures (1980b), Foucault explained that his philosophical trajectory as an attempt to escape, to ‘get out from the philosophy of the subject’ (opening line). By this he meant any philosophy which gives the individual subject a fundamental role in the constitution of meaning, which sees ‘the foundation of all knowledge and the principle of signification as stemming from the meaningful subject’ (Foucault & Sennett, 1981, pp.8-9). Although this hermeneutics of the self has become second nature to us, such that it would require a massive labour to free ourselves, the techniques that force individuals to fix their own identities ‘in a constraining way’ (Foucault, 1982, p.212) were clearly far from desirable for Foucault; they produced effects of misery. The task of ethics then, according to O’Leary, was to *increase* our freedom with respect to the specific manner in which we are determined, it is to allow us to open up a space between us and the forms of sexual identity imposed upon us by modern apparatuses (O’Leary, 2002, p.31).
and skill (*techne*).\(^3^9\) It was not the seeking of a final truth, or the adherence to codes, but a practice of artistic self-fashioning that transcended the formal, prescriptive, and dogmatic. The aesthetic attitude towards the self was centrally defined by the lack of external constraints or rules (transcendental values or social norms); the ethical self-transformation aspired towards an order that was held together by its own internal coherence. For there to be rules or principles governing the techniques that were used to transform the self, they would have to be invented by the individuals themselves (O’Leary, 2002, p.131). It avoided a universally imposed moral code (Foucault, 1990b [1984], p.254) and would provide ‘a very strong structure of existence, without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure’ (Foucault, 1984 [1983], p.348). It was, in fact, a relation that was ‘independent of any ‘statutory correlation’ and ‘isolate[d]…from the field of other power relations’ (Gros, 2001, p.540).

This insight bracketed a period in which ‘for a long time Foucault conceived of the subject as only the passive product of techniques of domination. It is only in 1980 that he conceives the relative autonomy, the irreducibility, anyway, of techniques of the self’ (Gros, 2001, p.525). It was not, of course, a sudden discovery of a free subject free from the historical to embark on a process of unfettered self-constitution, but the realisation that the individual-subject emerges at the intersection between that of techniques of domination and techniques of the self. In his analysis of the subject of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Foucault seemed unable to avoid the conclusion that it was the product of objective systems of knowledge and power. However, in his study of the techniques of existence in Greek and Roman Antiquity from the eighties onwards, a subject emerged that was not constituted but, but involved in constituting itself through well-ordered practices (Gros, 2001, p.513). The books published by Foucault in 1984, on the historical study of the relationship to pleasures in classical and late Antiquity are no longer characterised by the ‘demonstration-denunciation of a vast enterprise of normalization undertaken by the State’ (ibid., p.512), by the view that disciplinary power imposes predefined identities on individuals, or that submissive sexualities are constructed that align with social norms.\(^4^0\)

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\(^3^9\) *Epimeleia heautou* is the formulation for ‘care of the self’ or ‘concern for the self’ in classical Greek culture.

\(^4^0\) Foucault had proceeded according to ‘a hermeneutic spiral: what he brings out as new thought he finds again as the unthought of the work preceding it’ (Gros, 2001, p.515).
From this work, he saw that the techniques of the self existed ‘in every civilization’, and are defined as ‘the procedures…offered or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge’ (Foucault, 1997, p.87). Foucault himself appeared to increasingly see philosophical practice as a technique that could contribute to self-transformation in his later work (O’Leary, 2002, p.140). The practice of parrhesia (freedom of speech, truth-telling), for example, could operate as an alternative to the conceptualisation of relations between truth and subjectivity that compelled individuals to pronounce truths about themselves. The truth of the parrhesiastic art is not a truth whose contrary is a lie (a ‘moral’ truth), but a courageousness or integrity (a ‘truth to oneself’) that yielded a beautiful style which could be admired by others (Flynn, 1985, p.538). Foucault also believed ‘curiosity’ to be a praiseworthy orientation towards the world; he describes it as ‘a readiness to find what surrounds us strange and singular; a certain determination to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look otherwise at the same things’ (Foucault, 1997 [1980], p.325).

The task of transforming ourselves involves a philosophical ethos that may be described as the imaginative, creative attempt to surpass those limits which we judge to be no longer necessary – ‘a historico-practical test of the limits that we may go beyond’ (Foucault, 1984, p.47). Foucault suggests that the whole point of writing or reading his books is to try to ‘se déprendre se soi-même’, to detach oneself from oneself, or even to ‘disassemble the self’ (Foucault, 1988 [1984], p.8); the task of detaching oneself is carried out through a philosophical and historical investigation of our limits, being grounded on a kind of knowledge (O’Leary, 2009, p.125). However, he also asked:

41 As such, Foucault’s move to considering self-constitution resorts neither to the idealism of an absolutely undetermined autopoietic self-production nor to the pessimism of a complete determination by power. It bridges a divide between totalising theories of control that gave no scope for the subject to escape relations that completely determined them, and perspectives that seemingly decontextualised or made transcendent the subject’s self-determining capacity. Peter Hallward’s (2005, p.39) praise of Rancière’s approach to subjectivity, where the latter supposedly treads a thin line between the tendency to absolutise the subject and to subtract it entirely from what Hallward calls ‘objective mediation’ (the mediation of materiality, of the in-itself, of the imaginary, of the world, of representation), is something that I think can more appositely be applied to the work of Foucault’s late period and his ambition to walk that tightrope.

42 The problem was not of trying to dissolve power relations but of giving the subject the techniques of management, the ethics, ethos, the practices of the self, that would allow the games of power to be played with a minimum of domination (Foucault, 1987 [1984]).
'what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower's straying afield of himself?' (Foucault, 1988 [1984], p.8). This 'straying afield' is, in French, égarement, which means, quite literally, a wandering.

This conception of self-transformation has strong echoes of a Nietzschean influence, one that also faced an antinomy in its account of the creation of a self that is not free in a totally unfettered sense, but is an arranging, embellishing and shaping of what is received from the past in a way that genuinely chooses between certain pre-given paths (Hutter, 2006, p.15). As such, this indicates a critical and ethical theory that is devoid of unchanging universal principles external to the subject, but not without content, consistency, or historical context. The aesthetic solution notably depends upon there being no determinate rules by which a work of art is made. We can recall that for Kant, in *The Critique of Judgment*, the claim to universality of the work of art does not rest on concepts (§§6–9), and the artist cannot create such a work by learning rules. As such, judgments of beauty cannot be proved by resort to rules. Nevertheless, ‘every art presupposes rules’ (§46, 307), and the beautiful work is capable of serving as a ‘standard or rule by which to judge’ (§46, 308). Kant invoked the capacity of artistic genius (§46, 307) as that which enables individuals with the gift to produce beautiful objects without having to consciously follow any rules. We do not have to turn to a theory of artistic genius to establish a thesis concerning the workings of the aesthetic, but only hold that any individual is able to have or to be capable of adhering to a style that exhibits a coherence, but which cannot be adequately encapsulated under a determinate series of rules. The richness of an individual’s experiences and the complexity of their worldview surely contribute to this endeavour. Thus, the truth-practices that constitute the moral subject are ‘not nomothetic but aesthetic, creative of fitting moments of an admirable life’ (Flynn, 1985, p.536).

43 Sometimes, Foucault seemed to describe the practices of the self as bordering on a set of determinate truths: ‘[o]ne cannot care for self without knowledge. The care for self is of course knowledge of self…but it is also the knowledge of a certain number of rules of conduct or of principles which are at the same time truths and regulations. To care for self is to fit one’s self out with these truths. This is where ethics is linked to the game of truth’ (Foucault, 1988b, p.5).

44 Foucault emphasises the aspects of the work on the self that resonate with Nietzsche’s call for ‘long practice and daily work’ (cited in O’Leary, 2002, p.127). A distinction is required here between ‘work as product (œuvre) and work as process (travail),’ or between ‘the aesthetic as relating to beauty and as relating to techniques of transformation’ (ibid., pp.127-8). Foucault’s commitment to aesthetics does not require
Yet Foucault was known to have been notoriously suspicious of grand projects. ‘There must be no global implications in the historico-critical analysis of identity’, he wrote; ‘we must confine ourselves to specific transformations’ (Foucault, 1984, pp.46-7). Therefore, his turn to aesthetics with regard to the practices of the self proposed a way out of the cycle by which resistance is transformed into domination; as soon as a counter-power becomes victorious, it is transformed into a power complex that provokes a new counter-power. The way out was the exploration of new modes of subjectivity that was founded in an attitude of self-critique that could not be codified into a new power complex (see: McNay, 1992, p.87). Thus, he argues that we must get away from the idea that a total programme is required in order to bring about any transformation. Thinking human existence in terms of aesthetic categories ‘releases it from the realm of scientific knowledge. It liberates us from endless self-decipherment and from subjecting ourselves to psychological norms’ (Bernauer & Mahon, 2005, p.163), which is not to say that the self escapes all scrutiny. It is the new horizon for social change; Foucault does not have to wait for the revolution, because for him ‘the self is the new strategic possibility’ (Veyne, 1986, p.939).

**Foucault on the ambivalence of self-construction**

As I have noted in the introduction, this turn to the self comes with a certain ambivalence. Foucault was not unaware that the new kind of subjectivity which was required could not merely be individualising, since the State was precisely the matrix of individualisation, being simultaneously totalising and individualising; the problem of our time is not, as has been already noted, ‘to try to liberate the individual from the State and its institutions, but to liberate the individual from the State and from the type of individualization linked to the state’ (Foucault, 1982, p.216). Regarding the new imbrication of self and power, he remarked: ‘[n]ever, I think, in the history of human societies – even in the old Chinese society – has there been such a tricky combination in the same political structures of individualization techniques, and of totalization

him to make the case for a total programme of change, the kind that is threatened by an aestheticised politics, and which is foregrounded by a concern with beauty. Rather, it is the aesthetic as relating to a process or transformation. However, we should not forget that the goal for the individual was perhaps a preoccupation with the beautiful result of a stylish self.
procedures’ (Foucault, 1982, p.213). Nevertheless, he thought it possible, at least in some instances, to identify when ‘true’ aesthetic practices of the self actually inhered. He famously observed, concerning the California cult of the self, which he observed on his visit to Berkeley, and which centred around discovering one’s ‘true self’ and deciphering it with the aid of psychological or psychoanalytic science, that ‘[n]ot only do I not identify this ancient culture of the self with what you might call the Californian cult of the self, I think they are diametrically opposed’ (Foucault, 1984 [1983], p.271). If the former was a narcissistic quest in pursuit of a lost truth of the self, then the latter called for a vigilant introspection, for one not to be overcome by pains or pleasures, to be engaged in exercises and in work, being defined by ‘an ethic of immanence, vigilance, and distance’ (Gros, 2001, p.530).

Sociologists Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2013) have attempted to expand upon the separation between the neoliberal injunction to self-construction and self-enterprise on the one hand, and the transformative practices of the self. The ascès of the personal enterprise is completed by the subject’s identification with the enterprise, which they argue is quite different from the exercises of ‘self-culture’ referred to by Foucault, whose object was for the subject to establish an ethical distance from oneself – a distance from any social role. They draw upon what Éric Pezet (2007) has called an ‘ascèses of performance’, which represents a rapidly expanding market, including ‘coaching, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), transactional analysis (TA) – and numerous procedures associated with a ‘school’ or ‘guru’ aim at a better ‘self-mastery’ – of one’s emotions, stress, and relations with customers or collaborators, superiors or subordinates’ (cited in Dardot & Laval, 2013, p.269); the ‘falsity’ of these techniques, in terms of genuine practices of the self, turns on the fact that they are concerned only with enhancing the effectiveness of relations that one has with others without any further questioning. This neoliberal self-construction is not a ‘transsubjectivation’, which would involve aiming at a beyond-the-self that establishes a break with the self and self-renunciation. Nor is it a ‘self-subjectivation’ whereby one would seek to attain an ethical relationship to the self independently of any other goal, whether political or economic in kind. These are the two terms proposed by Foucault to explain the

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45 Gros (2001, p.530) argues that the whole of Foucault’s 1982 course successfully refutes the dual objections that have been made against him, that in turning to the ethics of the self, he either gave into a narcissistic dandyism that ultimately failed to disguise a loss of meaning, or a call for a cult of cherished marginality that valorised transgression as the basis of morality.
difference between third- and fourth-century Christian asceticism and the Hellenistic era’s more praiseworthy ‘culture of the self’ (Foucault, 2005, p.214). It is, in fact, an ‘ultra-subjectivation’, whose goal is not a final, stable condition of ‘self-possession’, but a beyond-the-self that is always receding, and which is constitutionally aligned in its very regime with the logic of enterprise and, over and above that, with the ‘cosmos’ of the world market and market valorisation as self-valorisation (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p.284). The contemporary version of epimeleia typically consists in ‘managing a business portfolio’, developing strategies for learning, marriage, friendship, educating one’s children, and managing the ‘capital of personal enterprise’ (ibid., p.267).

Neoliberalism and periodisation

This ‘ultra-subjectivation’ is precisely that from which we ought to wander away. In 1982, Foucault had declared that he was increasingly interested ‘in the kind of action that an individual practices on himself through techniques of the self’, to the extent of broadening his initial conception of governmentality, which had been unduly focused on techniques for exercising power over others: ‘I call ‘governmentality’ the encounter between techniques of domination exercised over others and techniques of the self’ (Foucault, 2001a, p.1604). Indeed, it is possible to pinpoint the moment when Foucault’s theorisation of ‘biopower’ is superceded by his concern with ‘governmentality’, that moment being January 1978, in the first lecture of that year at the Collège de France (O’Leary, 2002, p.178). To govern is therefore to conduct the conduct of human beings, on condition of specifying that this conduct pertains just as much to oneself as to others. That is why, Dardot and Laval state, government requires liberty as its condition of possibility: to govern is not to govern against liberty, or despite it; it is govern through liberty – that is, to actively exploit the freedom allowed individuals so that they end up conforming to certain norms of their own accord’ (2013, p.5). The term ‘governmentality’ was introduced to refer to the multiple forms of activity in which human beings, who may or may not be members of a ‘government’, seek to conduct the conduct of other human beings – that is, govern them (ibid., p.5).

46 Foucault introduces the year’s theme as being what he had called ‘biopower’ but goes on, in the fourth lecture of that year, to say that what he is really concerned with is ‘a history of ‘governmentality” (Foucault, 1991 [1978], p.102). After that point, ‘biopower’ disappears from Foucault’s vocabulary.
As Nikolas Rose (1999, p.3) puts it, this ‘government’ includes all endeavours to ‘shape, guide, direct the conduct of others … And it also embraces the ways in which one might be urged and educated to bridle one’s own passions, to control one’s own instincts, to govern oneself’.

Dardot and Laval’s (2013) primary thesis is that ‘neoliberalism’ constitutes a new mode of ‘governmentality’. “The main innovation of neoliberal technology”, they write, ‘precisely consists in directly connecting the way a person ‘is governed from without’ to the way that ‘he governs himself from within” (2013, p.264). The shift is pinpointed to have occurred in the last four or five decades, in which the crisis of the 1960s and 1970s was not merely an economic crisis but a crisis of governmentality; it is to this that neoliberalism responded (ibid., p.11). This topic has been notably addressed by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in their book The New Spirit of Capitalism, which attempts to answer how a new strain of capitalism, what they call a ‘connexionist’ or ‘network’ variant, has come to be in France without having met with the various forms of organised resistance that one might have expected. What Dardot and Laval argue (ibid., p.262) was mistaken in The New Spirit of Capitalism, however, was that the claims made by the new capitalism about itself in the managerial literature of the 1990s had been accepted by the authors as valid. That is to say, the claim was that the decline of the ‘social critique’ and comparative flourishing of the ‘artistic critique’ of May ’68 had led to a new spirit that was in many ways preferable to the old, when in fact there had simply been a transition into a more ‘individualized’ and more ‘competitive’ phase of bureaucratic rationalisation. If David Harvey is correct to argue that: ‘[n]eoliberalism…has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world’ (Harvey, 2007, p.3), then perhaps Boltanski and Chiapello’s oversight – accepting the positive claims of the managerial literature – can be partly attributed to the veracity of this very claim.

Dardot and Laval pick out several central features of this new mode of governmentality, being relatively faithful to Foucault in the process. For Foucault, neoliberalism makes the process of economic activity the centre of social and political

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47 Dardot and Laval’s book, The New Way of the World, ‘precisely specifies the analytical limits of governmentality and, in so doing, reduces the semantic elasticity of the term’ (Leonardi, 2014). The French title of the book, ‘La nouvelle raison du monde,’ refers not, of course, to a new way of the world but to a new reason or rationality, a rationality that is also a new mode of governance.
relations, but unlike classical liberalism, in which exchange was the basis of society, the true focus is not exchange – it is competition (2008, p.12). ‘Competition’ then, is one of these features. Whilst exchange was considered to be natural, competition was understood to be an artificial relation that needed to be protected by the state against the tendency for markets to form monopolies (Foucault, 2008, p.139). For Dardot and Laval (2013, p.10), neoliberalism cannot be reduced to the Marxist lens of the spontaneous expansion of the commodity sphere and the field of capital accumulation; it is a unique ‘econometric-institutional form’ not directly deducible from the logic of capital but the contingent effect of legal rules. In this, they differ from other commentators who have placed it as ‘an ideology that is generated not from the state, but from the experience of buying and selling commodities from the market, which is then extended across other social spaces to become an image for society’ (Read, 2009, p.26).

The other features include the calculative tendency to couch everything in terms of interests, returns, and risk. In so doing, what has been lost is the ‘tactical polyvalence of discourse’ (Foucault, 1987 [1976], p.101). This tendency to totalise has been referred to as a ‘world-reason’ (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p.3). As a rationality, it is characterised by its claim to neutrally mirror reality – the anthropology of man as an economic and competitive creature – while actually inculcating and concretising that reality (Lemke, 2002, p.60) since the state actively channels flows of interest and desire by making desirable activities inexpensive and undesirable activities costly, counting on the fact that subjects calculate their interests (Read, 2009, p.29). For Jameson (1990, p.263), as for many other commentators, the ‘naturalness’ of neoliberalism must be furiously contested: “[t]he market is in human nature’ is the proposition that cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged; in my opinion, it is the most crucial terrain of ideological struggle in our time’.

The calculative tendency requires not compulsion but ‘freedom’ as its condition of possibility, as Foucault (2008, p.63) remarked:

The new governmental reason needs freedom; therefore, the new art of government consumes freedom. It must produce it, it must organize it. The new art of government therefore appears as the management of freedom, not in the sense of the imperative: ‘be free,’ with the immediate contradiction that its imperative may contain...[T]he liberalism we can describe as the art of
government formed in the eighteenth century entails at its heart a productive/destructive relationship with freedom. Liberalism must produce freedom, but this very act entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats, etcetera.

That which is acted on by neoliberalism are the *conditions* of actions, not the *curtailment* of actions through threats of punishment. 48 These conditions are perpetuated through a ‘chain reaction’ in which ‘enterprising subjects’ in turn reproduce, expand, and reinforce competitive relations between themselves through their own voluntary actions (Dardot & Laval, 2014). The injunction for neoliberal subjects, it could be said, is deeply held and subconscious, seemingly originating from within. Dardot and Laval (ibid.) put it as follows: ‘[e]ach individual must work at their own efficiency, at intensifying their own effort, as if this self-conduct derived from them, as it is was commanded from within by the imperious order of their own desire, which there is no question of resisting’. Government imposes freedom on the subject, it installs freedom as a central characteristic of modern subjectivity and, having done so, perhaps it should not be very surprising if there are consequences like ‘voluntary inservitude’ and ‘reflective indocility’ (O’Leary, 2002, p.114). However, as the above passage also makes clear, this does not mean that forms of coercion or threats do not have a role to play; Foucauldian discipline is not eventually rendered redundant. Nevertheless, the transition to governmentality via biopower does signal what Jeffrey Nealon (2008) calls an ‘intensification’, with its Deleuzean connotations, of power. It can essentially be summed up as the operation of power finding ways to be efficient at less cost. 49

Competition, efficiency, and calculative rationality have so saturated the economic and social spheres that individuals who try and make intelligible the world perhaps come to recognise them as a ‘truth’. Insofar as this is the case, it is critical for power to cement this assent to the ‘truth’ given that ‘[t]he government of men demands

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48 As Rose (1999, p.4) puts it, ‘[t]o govern is to act upon action. This entails trying to understand what mobilizes the domains of entities to be governed….To govern humans is not to crush their capacity to act, but to acknowledge it and to utilize it for one’s own objectives’. Here, the phrase ‘one’s own objectives’ might be taken to imply that governmentality is consciously engineered for the benefit of the few individuals in power. However, Rose (1996a, p.42) makes clear that it is a form of rationality, ‘a set of ‘intellectual techniques’ for rendering reality thinkable and practicable’.

49 Clifford Geertz has also commented that with Foucault, ‘we seem to be faced with a kind of Whig history in reverse – a history, in spite of itself, of the Rise of Unfreedom’ (cited in Hoy 1986a, p.11).
not only acts of obedience and submission from those who are led, but also ‘truth activities,’ which have the peculiar feature that the subject is not only required to tell the truth but must tell the truth about himself’ (Gros, 2001, p.510). As such, the life of the neoliberal subject becomes a matter of a choice of existence, rather than a subjection. In a neoliberal social context, ‘[a]ll aspects of social behaviour are now reconceptualised along economic lines – as calculative actions undertaken through the universal human faculty of choice’ (Rose, 1999, p.141). Rose reasons that these calculative actions operate from the ground of an entrepreneurial, utilitarian cost-benefit analysis; the type of thinking that occurs in markets begins to express itself in calculative actions elsewhere. This calculative rationality finds optimal expression in risk management, which was once centralised to the government, but has, under neoliberalism, been transferred to the private sector and to individuals who must manage and assess their own levels of risk in the market.50

On the other hand, in an attempt to avoid too monolithic an account, Dardot and Laval (2013, p.11) have also remarked that capitalism is an ‘economicojuridical complex’ admitting of a multiplicity of unique forms rather than a mode of production governed by a singular logic operating as a natural law. Theories of deep neoliberalism hold that it operates not monolithically, but through ‘a multiplicity of governing networks, nodes and modes that allow for far greater levels of contingency and context-specific variation’ (Venugopal, 2015, p.170). Aihwa Ong (2007, p.1) argues that neoliberalism must be understood as radically decentralised and amorphous, whilst Jamie Peck (2010, p.15) states that ‘[t]he tangled mess that is the modern usage of neoliberalism may be telling us something about the tangled mess of neoliberalism itself’. As such, some scepticism must always accompany the conclusion that competition, efficiency, and calculative rationality, though they may offer a useful grid of intelligibility, can be uncovered anywhere that we care to look.

This is not to preclude the possibility of identifying cases in which there are elements of ultra-subjectivation, as opposed to transsubjectivation or self-subjectivation; it would be a mistake to declare the distinction between neoliberal self-fashioning and

50 Computer games, insofar as they enable the CPU to keep track of resources in the form of units, health, upgrades, buffs and de-buffs, as well as to present copious amounts of this information in visually arresting means, in a way that had hitherto been impossible, are perhaps the prime medium for experimenting with hypotheses about resource management, about gambling with one’s resources, and making guesses of the resources at an opponent’s disposal. This is of course further enhanced by the capacity to save game states at the precise moment before enacting a particular hypothesis.
the transformative practices of the self utterly and inseparably indistinguishable, to refrain from making any judgments whatsoever – theoretical self-reflexivity ought not culminate in an inability or unwillingness to be speculative about broader connections and implications. But nor should this solidify into outright unsophisticated denunciation or celebration, or the quest for rigidly formulaic diagnostic guidance. In the following section, I suggest that we can detect a sense of the body as ‘deep’ in Foucault’s writings, which may be a useful tool in thinking through this ambivalence. This then leads to a brief exploration of his interest in ancient practices, which hints at a standard or series of guidelines by which to judge the practices of the self, and which, when read together with his thoughts on the body, can amount to a case for an embodied rationality. Therefore, there are two main points: first, that Foucault himself turned to the body and its pleasures as outside of the flux of historical constitution; and second, that his celebration of Greco-Roman practices reveals that there was something more than a historical comparison, but the invocation of a standard, and that it has to come from ourselves, rather than from without.

**Conceptualising the body as ‘deep’**

It is well-known that Foucault’s strategy was to ‘proceed as far as possible in his analyses without recourse to universals’ (Rabinow, 1991 [1984], p.4). Nevertheless, Dews thinks that Foucault’s concern, in *Madness and Civilization*, was informed by the recognition that something quite valuable was being lost due to the forms of normalisation described. The concern was with those nuggets of irrationality or a-rationality that have the potential to surface in all of us in an everyday context; it was as much to do ‘with the plight of everyday consciousness in the modern world as with the specific fate of those labelled insane’ (Dews, 1984, pp.88-89). The partitioning away of the forces of frenzy, whim, and unpredictability is a disenchantment of the world *pace* Weber, and lamentable as such for the loss of the experience of the numinous. Consequently, and problematically for his framework, it is not possible to escape the sense of something having once been that was of value, but is now diminished. Connolly (1985, p.371) summarises this line of thinking by stating that power is understood to be an act of imposition because it imposes ‘an artificial reality on material
not designed to receive it’, that material being the self proper, which is to say that there can be a poor fit between a form of power and a material that stands outside it.

The claim would then be that the origins of what is repressed are to be found in the self, that bodies and pleasure can resist power. It is indeed possible to detect an ambivalent oscillation between the epistemological and the ontological that takes place between the apparatus of sexuality and that of a persistently mentioned pre-discursive ‘body and its pleasures’ (Foucault, 1981, pp. 150-9). For Dews (1986, p.35), Foucault is only able to contain this dilemma by returning to ‘a notion of self-constitution and self-reflection which he had denounced up until this point as illicitly Hegelian’, and which is – in short – ‘unmistakably ‘revisionist’. This can be contrasted with the earlier work of the 1970s, in Discipline and Punish, for example, the notion of the body remains little more than a cipher. It is anodyne, devoid of any hint of Nietzsche’s celebration (in On the Genealogy of Morals) of the ‘strength, joy and terribleness’ of the ‘old instincts’ which were crippled by the emergence of self-consciousness (Dews, 1984, p.89).

His most repeated position has undoubtedly been to cast aspersions on the view that ‘the body obeys the exclusive laws of physiology and that it escapes the influence of history’; ‘[n]othing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men’ (Foucault, 1984 [1971], pp.87-88). On the matter of the so-called autonomous self-determining subject, Foucault was quite unambiguous in his repeated avowals that the conditions of existence for such a subject are already rooted in power. In Power/Knowledge, for example, he writes:

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals (cited in Dews, 1984, p.88).

And similarly, in Discipline and Punish, Foucault (1991 [1977], p.30) declares that ‘[t]he man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a
subjected much more profound than himself. As such, the freedoms sought by the putatively self-determining subject appear to be illusory. Foucault’s ‘freedom’ appears to be relational; it cannot exist without power and cannot ultimately subdue or trump power. And thus, resistance is similarly problematic as it is also situated within power, and can itself be said to be a form of power as well as reproducing relations of power (Caldwell, 2007, p.8).

Yet Dews (1984, pp.89-90) points out that without some evocation of the intrinsic forces of the body, without some theory which makes the corporeal more than a malleable tabula rasa, it is impossible to reckon the costs imposed by ‘an infinitesimal power over the active body’. As such, his hostility to the idea of drives can be seen as a glaring omission in this respect. For Foucault, he was explicit that those forces or drives could not, however, be discovered in the ‘naturalness’ of sexuality. Sexuality has no greater claim to being natural, as something that had been repressed by the asceticism and work-discipline of bourgeois society, as anything else that was discursively produced (Foucault, 1981, p.103). It was not intrinsically opposed to power. In fact, the very idea of sexuality as a means of liberation was part of our system of servitude and formed part of the historical theme of intensifying control. It was the role of sexuality in determining the identity of subjects that was pernicious; the ‘deployment of sexuality’ generated the illusion that there exists ‘something other than bodies, organs, somatic localisation functions, anato-mo-physiological systems, sensations and pleasures’ (ibid., p.57).

Nevertheless, Foucault could not refrain from periodic referrals throughout The History of Sexuality, to ‘the body and its pleasures’ and to an ars erotica, in which ‘pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself’ (ibid., p.57).

51 Elsewhere, he has stated that ‘freedom everywhere’ (Foucault, 1987 [1984], p.123) and that ‘[p]ower is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realized. Where the determining factors saturate the whole there is no relationship of power; slavery is not a power relationship when man is in chains’ (Foucault, 1982, p.221).

52 Foucault’s decentring of agency closes down ideals of agency founded on intentional action, knowledge, autonomy and reflexivity (Giddens 1984). Acts of self-reflexivity, resistance and change are themselves discursively constituted and therefore potentially infinite. See also Caldwell (2007) on practice-orientated concepts of agency.
p.57), and which would be fundamentally opposed to a *scientia sexualis*.\(^33\) In addition, Hirst (1979) and Hall (2000) have pointed out that certain assumptions are already at work in order for a subject to be deemed susceptible to subjectification. The subject ‘must already have the faculties necessary to support the recognition that will constitute it as a subject’ (Hirst, 1979, p.65). Otherwise, there arises the problem of an infinite regress if those faculties come from without, since there must then be further faculties that make those faculties possible. That is to say, something had to be presupposed by the mechanisms of subjectification, something almost akin to an already constituted subject: Foucault’s ‘invocation of the body as the point of application of a variety of disciplinary practices’ tends to imbue it with ‘a residual materiality’ that pins back together those things which a theory of the discursive production of subjects, if taken to its limits, would disperse (Hall, 2000, p.24). The body is ‘almost the only trace we have left in Foucault’s work of a “transcendental signifier”’ (ibid.).

It would be an obdurate theorist indeed who insisted that even though the body is malleable, and can be made into heretofore unanticipated kinds of subjectivities, that it is therefore indefinitely malleable. It is difficult, for example, though not impossible, for workers to change easily from a day shift to a night shift given that the body adheres to circadian rhythms and to established hours and rhythms. Further, without a recognition of the limits of the prediscursive body, we would have to agree that it may be easier or less troublesome to transform ourselves to be more compliant or pliable to what is demanded by us of power than it would be to resist it and come into conflict with it. In such a case, it is less preferable to struggle, since we have by definition already a lesser reason to do so, than it is to comply. As such, our efforts must thereby lie in transforming ourselves to not wander away from the subjectivities imposed on us, but towards them. However, this does not appear compatible with Foucault’s own conclusion.

Levin (1989, p.115) acknowledges that ‘[c]onceptualising the body as ‘deep’ may be a way of capturing them for social domination: creating a depth of which the individual is unconscious and then filling it with a content (of meanings, motives, -conclusion.

\(^{33}\) His preoccupation with the power/body nexus was, after all, avowedly materialist given that he was troubled by the view that power functioned at the level of ideology, which already ‘presupposed a human subject on the lines of the model provided by classical philosophy, endowed with a consciousness which power is then thought to seize on’ (Foucault, 2000 [1980], p.58). Consequently, Foucault cared little for so-called consciousness-raising ideology critique, which marked off a possible avenue for critique to bring about change.
reasons, intentions, beliefs) that conforms to the dominant ideology and is taken, therefore, to confirm it. However, it is also the case that conceptualising the self and the body as ‘deep’ can be a means of ‘recognising an irreducible individuality and protecting self and body from social domination and totalisation’ (ibid.). Such an enterprise comes about through an attempt to theorise an ‘embodied rationality’ (ibid., pp.117-8). And it is precisely this aspect that is, according to Levin, omitted by Foucault, who should have considered the possibility that there could be ‘practices of the self which would not be technologies technologising the body, but which instead would respect, and draw on, the nature of the body’s own resources, its own organismic values, skills and capabilities, carrying them forward; not only into further self-development and individuation, but also into constructive social action’ (Levin, 1989, p.118). This was, however, precisely what he did consider in his investigation into the ancient practices of the self (as we will see), although he did not explicitly connect them to an overarching theory of the body as deep. As a result, Foucault can be seen to have sidestepped the issue of the ethical foundations for the aesthetics of the self.

For Levin (1989, p.113), Foucault’s conception of subjectivity cuts us off from a standard by which we might be able to take the measure of our practices and institutions, and resist their oppressiveness. This is by no means an unusual objection amongst Foucault’s critics. The body is ‘always in history’, for Foucault, since biology does not totally determine our being. And yet, it does not follow from this that our bodily nature is totally determined by its social history, which amounts to a false and self-defeating form of historicism. Though we can never encounter this biological nature outside of history, knowing it as it is in itself, it is nevertheless ‘an unchosen and uncontrollable facticity, a limiting condition given to history’ (Levin, 1989, p.115). Thus, given that any attempt to stipulate what the biological body is evidently cannot but be historically informed, we are left to navigate the antinomy of not being able to say what the body is for all time, and yet also having committed ourselves to the fact that there is something (contra Foucault’s explicit statements otherwise) that power crushes.54 As such, we ought to be sensitive to the contingency of any deep conceptualisation of the self and body, and this needs to be built into the conceptualisation itself.

54 Despite Foucault (1987 [1976]) having been explicit that power was productive and a ‘life-administering’ force that works by ‘addition’, not merely repressive or negative, there have been those who have made sustained arguments that Foucault’s freedom is in fact dependent on the incompleteness of discipline, and works in the gaps left by the operation of power, such as Thomas Dumm (1996).
Turning to the body need not provide an anchor as crude as a transcendental self, but it can potentially make more fine-grained distinctions between aspects that endure over the flux of historical change, but which are not totally immutable. In this way, there may be firmer ground to critique, as we will see, pernicious forms of self-fashioning such as the Californian cult of the self or neoliberal self-fashioning, as against the practices of the self in a context where voluntary play is constitutive of our subjectivities. It would still not be an absolute critique according to prescribed rules, but a contingent aesthetic one that takes recognises the lack of pure flux in historical change. Kevin Magill (1997) has argued that since Foucault was concerned with the way in which individual tie themselves to particular identities in their pursuit for a ‘truth’ – their ‘true’ sexual self, or the realisation of their potential in the present case – there could be therapeutic approaches that do not presuppose a pre-existing set of pathologising categories but aim to enable individuals to develop their own understanding of their problems and ways of resolving them. He thinks that the approach of R.D. Laing (1960) is such an example, as is that of Woodward (1988); these approaches have stressed the importance of being attentive to why individuals seek therapy, what they hope to get out of it, and how they understand their problems (Magill, 1997, p.71).

However, the dependence on framing the body as deep will undoubtedly be accompanied by the risk of an accompanying normative dimension, as was the case with late Stoicism, which started to assert that one was obliged to do something because one was a rational being. It is in fact the ‘will to knowledge’ that has left us in the dark about the concrete functioning of power in Western societies (Rabinow, 1991 [1984], pp.5-6). Yet there is also the prospect that the means to access and verify this quasi-transcendental prediscursive truth of the body may be non-cognitive, which is an issue that will be explored in chapter five with respect to Schiller’s ‘play drive’ as a faculty for mediating between sense and reason. Although there are difficulties with this solution, as will be seen, it avoids recourse to a determinate set of normative judgments whilst also holding to the idea that there is something that may indeed be crushed by the operation of power, and which would enable us to distinguish between different kinds of self-constitution. The next section of the chapter turns to Foucault’s reading of ancient practices and ethics to further support this insight.

55 These approaches mark a positive contrast to that of psychologist Will Schutz, as we will see in chapter four.
The ancients’ guidelines for good practice

It has been remarked that the only criteria under the aesthetic is that acts ‘must be performed tastefully’ (Wolin, 1986, p.84). Eagleton (1990, p.394) rather invidiously raises the question of what ‘a stylish rape’ would look like. It may be quite true to conclude, on this basis, that if aesthetic self-transformation is simply a ‘privatised will to power’ (Lewandowski, 1995, p.240), then ‘[a] society of self-fulfillers…cannot sustain the strong identification with the political community which public freedom needs’ (Taylor 1989, p.508). That is to say, the mode of life propagated is shallow and cannot provide the basis for a larger social model. So the question is posed: how can we distinguish between practices of the self that are manipulative and exploitative of others, and those that are not? Foucault’s gambit, I argue, is that there is a higher principle at work that cannot be cognitively encompassed, but which precludes the possibility of such outcomes as ‘stylish’ rapes.

This section attempts to think what guidelines might be inferred from Foucault’s reading of the ancient practices. The hope will be to draw inferences about that standard or principle from reading into his account of the ancient practices without deriving a set of firm principles or codes from them. The ancient practices offer us guidelines, not ethical obligations, on one’s relation to oneself; this is why they are considered to be an ethico-aesthetics – strict adherence under all possible circumstances is not as central to being an ethical subject as the cultivation of the appropriate ethos. In any case, Foucault was presumably getting at some kernel that we can distil from the ancient practices such that it would have greater relevance or applicability today than the mere imitation of antiquated behaviours, yet he says little that is specific on the nature of that kernel or on the conditions of possibility that facilitated those ancient practices besides that the individual subject only ever emerges at the intersection of a technique of domination and a technique of the self. What emerges from the reading is

56 Alan Donagan’s (1977) *The Theory of Morality* concerns the morality of one’s duties to oneself, but takes the form of a set of duties that one has to others, attempting to elaborate a governing moral *code*. There are discussions on the prohibition against suicide, self-mutilation, and so on, as well as plans for how to develop one’s mental and physical powers. As a code, or set of obligations, it attempts to be exhaustive, and Donagan tries to determine how rigorous these duties are, when exceptions are permissible, and what form these exceptions may take. Though it concerns the relationship to self, it is contrary to the character of the ancient practices as *guidelines*, and as emphasised by Foucault, since the closed and prescriptive character of ethical codes was precisely what he sought to avoid.
a tension between pragmatism and a faithful relation to one’s own truth that is to be overcome by the individual’s work on themselves.

I will note the disclaimer that we are not wedded to the particular form of these ancient practices; they should not be regarded as exhaustive and there may well be practices that cultivate freedom that have not yet been envisaged. In addition, if there is an attempt to derive an overall rule from them, that enterprise will be fraught with difficulty insofar as first, they are grounded in the aesthetic, which surpasses any cognitive rule; and second, that Foucault’s motivation for turning to ancient practices was to effect a distancing from the hermeneutics of the subject and the deep self to better assist our present struggles, rather than to furnish a finished set of ahistorical guidelines. As O’Leary (2002, p.139) has remarked, ‘[o]ne of the dangers of attempting any precise characterization of a key element in an ethics which was never systematized by its author…is that we will either limit the possible ways of thinking about ethics, or we will elevate more or less contingent elements to the status of essential principles’. The ancient techniques offered ‘a certain vantage point from which we might critically address our contemporary forms of ethical self-constitution’ (ibid., p.16). They are ‘a useful counterpoint to the modern hermeneutic model of relation to the self; they are also ‘a critical indictment of the modern mode of self relation: in a comparison between the two, it is the ancient model that triumphs’ (ibid., p.37).

However, even if they did not amount to any kind of final, codified solution, the point could not avoid being, as O’Leary (2002, p.83) points out, ‘they [the ancients] were free, we are not, so let’s regain what they had.’ The free mode of sexual ethics in Classical antiquity is notably contrasted with the repressive mode under Christianity, and Foucault tells the story of a passage towards this unfreedom. On this point, Cambiano (1994, p.155) says that Foucault attributes a ‘free form’ to ancient sexual practices, whilst Patton (1989, p.276) declares that Foucault’s reading of Classical sexual ethics ‘presupposes a freedom on the part of the men to whom it was addressed.’ In this sense, even the attempt at the mere repetition of epimeleia heautou would not be an unmitigated disaster, though it would undoubtedly be more forward-looking to use it as an inspiration from which to create something new. If Foucault is right, then these ancient practices are of use to us now, even if they might not always be so. The stronger reading, based on the view that we cannot avoid recourse to something quasitranscendental, is that insofar as there is a logic to the body or the socialised body, and one that is not historically ephemeral, there may well be practices that are beneficial and
those that are pernicious – these ancient practices can be read with this in mind. The relevant material, on guidelines concerning how to go about these practices, is of course more expansive than I can hope to present here, and has been selectively summarised. In chapter four, I will briefly compare these practices with the practices that are attributed to various player typologies of the role-playing game Oblivion.

- Practice

Foucault noted that no skill could be acquired without exercise, without practice. The forms that training took included ‘abstinences, memorizations, examinations of conscience, meditations, silence, listening to others’, and ‘writing for oneself and others’ (Foucault, 1984 [1983], p.364). This list is so broad that it could potentially encompass any kind of arduous mental activity, but some of the more notable examples of the ancient practices and the ideals that informed them are examined below, though they may appear more akin to attitudes than to the inflection of ‘practice’ that points towards what we would see as a form of ‘training’.

- Struggle

Foucault emphasised the agonism of the perpetual struggle with the self, in which there must be self-suspicion:

To be stronger than the self entails that one is and remains on the lookout, that one is constantly mistrustful of oneself, and that one is so not only in daily life but in the very flux of representations which may trigger inspection and control (cited in Gros, 2001, p.535).

The ‘distance’ required for this ethics is not to be mistaken for solitude, since Foucault insisted that the care of the self is an inherently social practice that ‘goes so far as to entail the Other in principle’, but rather ‘the distance between oneself and one’s actions that constitutes the necessary state of vigilance’ (ibid., p.536; p.537).

The distance from action means ‘not letting yourself be entirely occupied by your activities, not identifying your life with your function…not trying to establish what you are on the basis of the system of rights and obligations which differentiate and situate you with regard to others, but rather questioning
yourself about what you are in order to infer from this what it is fitting to do’.
(ibid., p.539).

- Notebooks and distancing
One example of the practice of this vigilant distancing was the hypomnemata, which was a notebook that was in vogue during Plato’s time among the cultivated public, and was a new technology ‘as disrupting as the introduction of the computer into private life today’ (Foucault, 1984 [1983], p.363). They ‘constituted a material memory of things read, heard, or thought’, which could be used for later meditation and reading, or ‘for the writing of more systematic treatises in which were given arguments and means by which to struggle against some defect (such as anger, envy, gossip, flattery) or to overcome some difficult circumstance (a mourning, an exile, downfall, disgrace)’(ibid., p.364). Foucault (1994 [1980], p.27) had always reserved a special place for writing and the power of language with regard to self-transformation, opining that ‘I write in order to change myself and in order to no longer think the same thing as before’. But the point with regard to the hypomnemata was not the note-taking, the aide-memoire, or the writing itself. The objective was to re-examine and re-evaluate what one has done so that one becomes more mindful in the future, so that one does not give into instinct or one’s own inclinations, but adopts a reflective attitude. This requires breaking with what comes easily or naturally, and is fostered via a distancing from ourselves.

- Transgressive lifestyle and transgressive acts
Foucault view was that ‘[t]he “true life,” the life which puts itself to the test with regard to the truth, cannot fail to appear to the common people as a transgressive other life which marks a break’ (Gros, 2011, p.356). In the ancient world, philosophy was a way of life that implied a rupture with bios, or daily life. To be a philosopher was to be atopos, to be unclassifiable, as Socrates was called in the Platonic dialogues. Davidson (2005, p.134) argues that for Foucault, the gay lifestyle that can accompany contemporary homosexuality was an analogue to those ancient practices insofar as ‘both require an ethics or ascetics of the self tied to a particular, and particularly threatening way of life.’ Foucault appeared to place more emphasis on the lifestyle, which had a corresponding inner attitude – in the way that different philosophical schools such as Stoic, Epicurean, Platonist, each represented a different style of life (Hadot, 1987, cited in Davidson, 2005, p.132) – than on particular acts, although gay male sexual practices were related to a
style of life that expressed a new sense of masculinity that was transgressively devirilised or desexualised. This was also closely allied to the need to risk oneself; in the Socratic _elenchus_, doing philosophy has the requirement that Socrates’ respondents should say only what they themselves believe, which is in contrast to what they think they ought to say, and it is in this way that they can best examine themselves.

- Being ready for the world

Some parts of the care of the self articulated by Foucault, on the other hand, seem undeniably pragmatic. In the dossier ‘Government of the self and others’, he writes that:

> Whatever the exercises may be, one thing is worth noting, which is that they are all practiced by reference to situations that the subject may also have to confront: it is therefore a matter of constituting the individual as a rational subject of action, of rationally and morally acceptable action. The fact that all of this art of life is focused on the question of the relationship to the self should not mislead us: the theme of the conversion to the self should not be interpreted as a desertion of the domain of activity, but rather as the pursuit of what makes it possible to maintain the relationship of self to self as the principle, as the rule of the relationship to things, events and the world.

This passage hinges on what it means for one to be ready for the situations that one may have to confront, and whether one does so in a way that necessarily rationally maximises one’s utility in those situations. The reference to ‘a rational subject of action’, with the connotations that the word ‘rational’ has for us, perhaps inclines us to preclude instances such as, for example, Socrates’s decision to take hemlock from its scope despite it having been done in order to be faithful to his own truth and his relation to truth. This arguably brings one requirement or understanding of the practices of the self (practising exercises that are ‘rational’) into conflict with another (being ‘true’ to oneself regardless of the consequences).

This putative conflict can be mitigated by turning to Foucault’s appeal to the ancient idea of cosmic harmony.57 White’s (1985) reading of Stoic ethics yields the result

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57 It has been noted, however, that Foucault’s interpretation of the culture of self in the Hellenistic epoch is not unproblematic. In particular, rather than merely a distancing and aesthetic self-construction, Pierre Hadot (2002, cited in Dardot & Laval, 2013, pp.272-273) has commented that mere distancing and aesthetic self-construction does

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that virtue consists in giving one’s life and one’s actions the rational, ordered pattern which one can observe in the world (see: O’Leary, 2002, p.79). To live ‘in agreement [homologoumenos] with nature’ was not to simply conform to the natural order, it was to make one’s own logos consonant with the logos of the natural world; it was to bring these two logos into harmony with each other (White, 1985, pp.66-67). Marcus Aurelius also viewed the universe as a benevolently ordered whole that ‘gives the rule’ to man; it is this ‘whole’ that acts as a moral guide. Nature itself exhibits a rationality that is to be used as a guide.

- Intersubjectivity and the relation to others and to self

It would be unfair to dismiss, as some have done, the practices of the self as solely a subject-centred morality that has ‘no sense whatever of the importance of collective goals or aspirations’ (Grimshaw, 1993, p.68) or that do not give us any sense of the intersubjective and collective nature of social agency. Foucault was quite keen to show that the care of the self was not a solitary exercise but a social practice; it was necessary to correctly care for the self in order to correctly care for others (Gros, 2011, p.354). It was a game of freedom in which internal construction took precedence over the political transformation of the world. In the post-classical view, one had to be master of oneself because one was related to others, who are also masters of themselves (Foucault, 1984 [1983], p.358).

Jean-Pierre Vernant (1991, cited in Davidson, 2005, p.135) says that the daimón, or spark of divinity in each of us is a supernatural force whose function in the universe goes beyond our single person: it is ‘the soul in me and not my soul’. Similarly, Pierre Hadot (1987 cited in Davidson, 2005, p.129) has argued that an essential element of the ancient spiritual exercises was ‘the feeling of belonging to a Whole’ or cosmic consciousness, what Seneca called Toti se inserens mundo (‘plunging oneself into the totality of the world’). Freedom is achieved:

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not capture the essence of the culture of the self in the Hellenistic epoch, which was focused on self-transcendence through a conforming harmonisation with a cosmological order.

58 Lewandowski (1995, p.239) has asked: to what extent is self-constitution and mastery reconcilable with, say, the ethical and political ideals of liberal democracy – mutual recognition, collective decision making and universal rights? Or, how can we be sure that we will proceed towards the right direction?
by a movement in which one passes from individual and impassioned subjectivity to the objectivity of the universal perspective. It is a question, not of a construction of a self as a work of art, but, on the contrary, of a surpassing of the self, or, at the least, of an exercise by which the self situates itself in the totality and experiences itself as part of this totality’ (ibid, pp.129-130, emphasis added).

This going beyond the self, or even abnegation of the self, resonates with acting in harmony with the rule of nature so that one acts, as do others, in accordance with the totality of the world. It is far from being a narcissistic detachment; it is a work on the foundations of the first relation – the self to itself – in order to bring about, amongst other things, a change in the relation with others.

Such an idea is a basis from which blanket arguments that allege that single-player games, insofar as they do not foreground the relations between self and others, and so can have no place in the inculcation of an ethical relation to self, may be challenged. Foucault has examined the notion of the daimón, which can be understood as ‘that internal divinity that guides us and which we must venerate and respect, that fragment of divinity in us that constitutes a self before we must justify ourselves. It is a subject in the subject, it is in us like an other to whom we owe worship (Gros, 2001, p.542). The daimón is like the mythical figure of a first irreducible caesura: that of self to self. And the Other takes up its place within this relationship, because there is first of all this relationship. In this way, the care of the self does not isolate us from the human community but connects us to it since ‘the privileged relationship, fundamental to himself, must enable him [the subject] to discover himself as a member of a human community, which extends from the close bonds of blood to the entire species’ (dossier Government of the self and others, cited in Gros, 2001, p.538). The care of the self is an ‘intensifier of social relations’ (ibid.) where the other is the correspondent to whom one writes and before whom one takes stock of oneself (ibid., p.537).

From the personal to the impersonal

As I have stated, we must be tentative with regard to any criteria that are inferred since they must not be codified. However, the project remains that of distinguishing between
practices that tend towards what are ultimately judged to be good and bad subjectivities respectively; there are still value criteria at stake. On the basis of an embodied rationality that stems from recognising the body as deep, compulsive or pernicious forms of practice would be ones that thwart this embodied rationality and drive the subject to develop self-destructive modes of being. This is presumably what is being referred to when Dardot and Laval (2013), for example, mention rising rates of anomie and suicide in relation to the new precarious entrepreneurial self, which often culminates in a self-implosion. These pernicious practices are geared not towards a surpassing or mastering of the self, as advocated in the ancient practices, but only in the fomenting of a subjectivity conducive to unsustainable neoliberal capital. However, it is possible to make the case that neoliberalism is the new natural order of things, and that we must therefore, following the ancient guidelines, harmonise ourselves with it. As Dardot and Laval (2013, p.273) point out, the contemporary ‘ascesis of performance’ has a claim to the universal in finding a justification in ‘an economic order that transcends the individual’, and which harmonises the individual’s conduct with ‘the ‘cosmological order’ of global competition enveloping it’. And further, ‘the exercises that are supposed to bring about an improvement in the subject’s conduct aim to make of the individual a ‘microcosm’ in perfect harmony with the universe of the enterprise and, over and above that, with the ‘macrocosm’ of the global market’ (ibid.). This point brings out the fact that following the guidelines already requires a great deal of interpretation.59

O’Leary (2002, p.76) has argued that ‘Foucault’s account elevates the theme of the care of the self to the position of principal aim and target of Hellenistic ethics’, which leads to the result that ‘it overlooks the central normative role which Stoicism gave to ‘reason’ and ‘nature’. The ethical life is the life lived naturally, in accordance with the principles of reason. Hadot (1989, cited in O’Leary, 2002, p.82) has also prominently emphasised that the model in Antiquity was an openness to the ‘universal,’ an attempt to live in ‘the universality of the cosmic perspective, in the wonderful and mysterious presence of the universe’, and certainly not a form of dandyism. The self

59 We can conceive of gameplay examples in which the player is driven to adopt a routine of compulsive play in which there is little room for inventiveness or imagination, since a player’s actions are mapped out in advance – they must merely commit the effort and will that they are encouraged to do by the rhetoric within the game. The example of levelling up in Oblivion can, as we will see, seem not far removed from this. Perhaps the issue is only one of consistency: does obeisance of neoliberal principles feel like a harmonious logos? If the latter is not the case, then one may be inclined to conclude that neoliberalism is not homologoumenos. This issue will be explored in further detail in chapter five.
involved in the ancient self-practices was an *impersonal* concept, removed from the *personal* dandyism that Foucault identified with the modern man. Yet Foucault’s (1994 [1980], pp.45-6) reading of the ancient practices cannot be so easily dismissed on the grounds of their historical inaccuracy if we bear in mind that he sought to strike a balance between two demands: ‘the demand that a history be true ‘in terms of academic truth’ and also true in the sense that it produces an experience which permits ‘a transformation of the relation which we have to ourselves and the world’. That is to say, especially in view of the fact that Hadot himself conceded that any historical interpretation is coloured by an ethical outlook, our main concern is simply how to justify balancing these demands in the way that we do.\textsuperscript{60} This balancing is, it should be recalled, echoed by Foucault’s explanation of ‘transfiguration’ in ‘What is Enlightenment?’, which points to the interplay between the truth of what is real and the exercise of freedom. The latter cannot be detached from contemplating the former, and the former must be considered with a view to the latter.

I argue that what is crucially required, in the way that Foucault invokes the ancient practices, is the movement from personal reasons for the pursuit of self-care, or reasons that can be understood by the individual in terms of their own desired self-stylisation, to impersonal ones that transcend the individual. Somewhere along the process of the actions involved in the care for the self, the individual is overtaken by a rationale more profound than a self-centred dandyism, and transitions into acting for the sake of surpassing the self, and of attaining a cosmic harmony. This is the mysterious moment, the un-cognisable point. It is the leap being made here that overshadows disputes over historical accuracy in importance. In fact, had Foucault drawn upon the arguably more accurate Stoical conception of impersonal self as a fragment of divine reason, it would likely have made little sense to our modern sensibilities in place of a critical ontology of ourselves as an injunction.

This movement can be seen to be echoed in Foucault’s decidedly ambiguous articulation of ‘truth’. Foucault believed that the constitution of the self can only occur through a specific relationship to truth, or through a ‘game of truth’ (1994, p.633); ever since Platonism, the *epimeleia heautou* has caused the subject to enter into a relation with

\textsuperscript{60} It is also possible to challenge the view that Foucault’s reading was an unabashed *personal* view of the self: the Platonic dimensions of the aesthetics of existence ‘ultimately undermines the stylistic in favour of a more cognitive, *universalistic* morality’ (Flynn, 1985, p.536, emphasis added).
truth.\(^{61}\) Han (2002) has noted that ‘truth’ appears to be, on the one hand, a self-induced ontological determination of the being of the subject, concerning only the relation of the self with itself – it is subjective. On the other, a ‘game of truth’ involves a set of rules for the production of truth, an ensemble of procedures that cannot be understood from the individual perspective of the self to self-relation – it is non-subjective. Yet a key point remains that the truth entailed a movement away from individual particularity:

the Platonic subordination of the epimeleia beantou to the Delphic imperative of the gnōthi seauton, far from introducing a refocusing on the individual in its particularity, demands, on the contrary, that the subject should relate the truth of what he is to a metaphysics that teaches him about truth in general. The subject can “only be what he must be through the knowledge of the truth itself”...The great novelty introduced by Platonism, therefore, is the idea that the constitution of the self entails a recognition which, by denying individual differences, makes the truth of the subject inseparable from knowledge in general. (Han, 2002, p.178).

The purpose of the techniques of the self, therefore, is ‘not to generate a knowledge of the self as an individual, but to incite the subject to deny his particularity in order to become “capable of truth,” and make him conform to that which he must recognise as being his own essence’ (Han, 2002, p.178). The truth is the conversion of the subject to himself which allows him to harmonise his bios with his logos (Flynn, 1988, p.108). The true and truthful subject has thus become a Parrhesiast, for whom there is an adequation between the subject of the statement and the subject of action (Han, 2002, p.179). In other words, the truth of the subject cannot be established in isolation and only makes sense against a background of a wider understanding of truth itself, to which it is necessary to have access to be able to constitute oneself (ibid., p.177).

Thus, it is perhaps after this un-cognisable point has been reached that the pragmatic sense articulated in the practices above can be reconciled with the transgressive sense. These guidelines on the practices of the self do not necessarily suggest that one is rigidly committed to repeating the same actions every day in the hope that a transformation of the self will eventually occur. Nor are they about

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\(^{61}\) The concern for a beautiful existence was linked to the concern for truth-telling by means of care of the self in the work of Socrates at the dawn of Western philosophy’ (Flynn, 1988, p.109).
encouraging transgressions unless there is a relation to the ‘truth’ that is threatened. They point to patterns of action that evidence the appropriate ethos, which is that of a vigilant distancing as well as a plunging of oneself into the world. In any case, if the practices of the self can be said to steer one towards a surpassing of the self and a harmonious relationship with nature and with others, then it will need to be asked how the lack of rules in the development of one’s own style of existence can bring various distinct individuals to this finality, as opposed to some other much more banal outcome. One possible answer would be that Foucault necessarily relies upon a prediscursive, or at least quasi-transcendental bodily logic that directs us in the right way. This discussion will be bracketed until we are in a position to disambiguate between forms of self-constitution in computer games. In chapter five, I will explore this point further, in the form of the non-cognitive interplay between our use of the faculties of the ‘imagination,’ and that of the ‘understanding,’ which may be thought to guide the practices of the self towards freedom.

In the next chapter, I turn to the issue of subjectification in computer games as it has been addressed in the existing literature. The aim will be to show that the dimension of self-constitution is particularly appropriate as a means of understanding the cybernetic nature of players’ identification with a process following a learning cycle driven by the players themselves. The ethopoetic relation to the ‘truth’ that is developed is a practice of the self that is revealed through evidence adduced by oneself, in the weft of accomplished actions, but which also resonates with a government by the ‘truth.’

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It seems that in order to go about it in the right way, either there must be conceptualisable guidelines that are followed, or there is already a natural non-cognitive tendency to follow certain non-conceptualisable guidelines. On this point, Foucault’s late work has been remarked to contain a ‘Sartrean turn’ in his stance towards freedom (Han, 2002); Sartre (2007 [1946]) himself attempted to counter the accusation that existentialism was nihilist by stating that there was one guideline his work offered, which was that humans should relate to themselves and others as free. The equivalent to this cornerstone, if it existed for Foucault, was never made explicit, but this does not preclude his effectively having some similar kind of commitment.
Chapter two

Beyond games of rehearsal: ethopoiesis and the identification with a process

As I have indicated in the introduction, this thesis does not conceive of computer games as being disciplinary power structures. There may exist in-game ‘punishments’ and rewards, but the fact that computer games have become more complex, and aspire to appeal to a wider of players, together with the voluntary playfulness involved, means that they are not conducive towards mechanically punching out particular subjectivities. This comports with the shift in modes of power, and with their status as the ideal commodity of post-Fordist production. Foucault noted that the surveillance, supervision, and direction aimed to produce exact conformity were called for when the mode of production involved great factories, iron-works or mines, since ‘the slightest dishonesty on each object would add up to an immense fraud…the slightest incompetence, if left unnoticed and therefore repeated each day, may prove fatal to the enterprise’ (Foucault, 1991 [1977], p.175). The neoliberal state today needs, with its reliance on immaterial labour and flexible work, ‘more than self-regulating individuals, networked actors who actively forge the structures necessary for the transformation from centralized state powers to disseminated modes of neoliberal regulation’ (Papadopoulos, 2008, p.153).

This does not mean, however, that practices of active subjectification do not produce or result in a form of ‘training’, or that it is so diffuse that we cannot make any claims about it. As such, there may well be something for which computer games train us, make us better at doing, but articulating this is certainly not without difficulty. This issue will be dealt with more fully in chapter three, which is concerned with exploring how to think about the practices of the self that are implied or invited by the ‘rationality’ of a particular game, as I will go on to explain, and where the operative conditions are ones of non-necessity and non-neutrality. The present chapter confines itself to take a general outlook, one in which I have bracketed characteristics that may be particularly germane to only certain genres or kinds of games, by proceeding from a review of the existing literature that have discussed computer games and their role in
the constitution of subjectivities in a general sense. Beginning from Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s (2009) claim that computer games produce subjectivities suited to Empire, I move on to Arsenault and Perron’s (2009) ‘magic cycle’, then Friedman’s (2005) notion of ‘thinking like a computer’, and others’ use of Jameson’s (1991) concept of ‘cognitive mapping’. What is brought out is the subjectification at work in the process by which players learn, which calls for a much closer analysis of the entanglement between power and subjectivity than disciplinary accounts are capable of offering. The onus is on us, and the game tries to inculcate our exploration of its rules and laws. It will be shown that the training in question is not towards an easily determined end, but is for us to self-motivate, to develop a relation to a system of incentives and disincentives. In short, it is to cultivate our own relationship to a ‘truth’ that we discover in the process of coming to comprehend a system. In this way, the nature of the training depends much on what we bring to the game in terms of a mindset that is then honed and developed. The system itself is far from neutral in this, even though different players may develop very different kinds of relationships to it, which will be explored in later chapters. This chapter terminates with some reflections about the ethopoetic truth, as part of the practices of the self, which is discovered by the subject themselves. There is the hint that the processes of internalising the logic of the programme, thinking like a computer, or systems cognition can point to an extra-individualistic mode of cognition, a ‘super-instrumentality’ that bodes some potential for transformative practices, and which will be taken up in later chapters.

**Disciplinary games of Empire**

Foucault’s well-known notion of ‘discipline’ has been widely applied to the study of computer games. As Humphreys (2008, pp.154-155) notes, with regard to MMORPGs:

Computer games technologies have the ability to quantify, measure, differentiate and compare players’ actions. The cybernetic feedback loops that make this possible allow particular kinds of play to be rewarded and encouraged…[this] can be read as disciplining mechanisms which resonate with Foucault’s (1977) discussion of the ‘correct means of training’: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and examination, in the production of subjectivities.
amenable to the goals of particular institutions (schools, armies, etc.). Coupled with the panopticon-like surveillance within digital environments, players can be encouraged to self-regulate within the game. These technologies - surveillance, assessment of performance and reward systems - encourage the production of a subjectivity amenable to the goals of the publisher, which are usually to foster an environment in which players generate ‘value’ for the game: cooperative, law-abiding, nice to other players, creative, active, competitive and so on.

It is telling that this kind of disciplinary perspective has usually been applied to multiplayer games, particularly MMORPGs. In single-player games, considerations of fostering the right kind of inter-player environment do not exist, but players are no less subject to a reward schema that quantifies their actions and to a tutorial that steers them towards understanding that there are gradations in which a gamic act can be judged in terms of its success or correctness.63 These acts generally have to be repeated in order to progress through the game, giving the player the chance to hone their execution. For Silverman and Simon (2009), the grind and the avatar levelling process exemplifies the disciplinary aspect of computer games. The section in Discipline and Punish in which Foucault detailed the replacement of the apprenticeship system with a technique that assured graduated knowledge accumulation through a series of repetitive exercises that were divided into temporally defined segments, ordered into a succession of increasing complexity, with each segment finalised by an examination, has a particular resonance. This served the triple function of showing whether the subject has reached the level required, of guaranteeing that each subject undergoes the same apprenticeship and of differentiating the abilities of each individual. Following this, each individual could be sorted according to their level and the exercises that are most suited to them (Foucault, 1991 [1977], cited in Silverman & Simon, 2009, p.359).64

63 Crucially, however, there are no surveilling authorities that will contact the player in the event of infractions. In single-player games, either an action is possible, in which case it is permitted, or it is not possible.

64 Silverman and Simon (2009, p.355) have also aptly recognised that ‘Foucault’s subjects and institutions were analog, ours are digital’. The game guild as a disciplinary site is not comparable to an army or to a school, where penalties such as physical punishment, dishonourable discharge, or imprisonment can be handed down for insubordination in the case of the former, and additional work or detention in the case of the latter – there is no immediate physical presence of bodies that may be acted upon by power (ibid., p.363).
It is perhaps in the vein of the ‘correct means of training’ that Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter begin *Games of Empire*. They argue that the ‘militainment’ which forms the core of *America’s Army* and the ‘ludocapitalism’ that is embedded within *Second Life* neatly echo the two pillars of ‘Empire’, which are ‘the military and the market’ (2009, p.xiv).65

The two games reassert, rehearse, and reinforce Empire’s twin vital subjectivities of worker-consumer and soldier-citizen: *Second Life* recapitulates patterns of online shopping, social networking, and digital labor crucial to global capitalism; *America’s Army* is but one among an arsenal of simulators that the militarized states of capital - preeminently the United States - depends on to protect their power and use to promote, prepare, and preemptively practice deadly operations in computerized battlespace (pp.xiv-xv).

The constitution of subjectivities at work in these instances is described as ‘reassertion’, ‘rehearsal’, and ‘reinforcement’ - in playing the game, one is partaking in rehearsing activities that are firmly within the remit of activities performed by the worker-consumer and the soldier-citizen; and in repetitiously performing them, one cements one’s identity and subjectivity. I will refer to this as the ‘rehearsal thesis’.66 It is a commonly argued position within the study of games, given that games have often been used for military training purposes, even before computer simulations came to be used

65 Empire is governance by global capitalism. Hardt and Negri (2000, p.xii) claim that we are witnessing the emergence of a new planetary regime in which economic, administrative, military, and communicative components combine to create a system of power ‘with no outside’. Its decentralised, multilayered institutional agencies include nation-states but extend to include multinational corporations, and it is a regime of biopower exploiting social life in its entirety (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p.xx).

66 A few pages on, it is given in a slightly different form, as one of the seven points that the authors state they will argue for in the book: ‘[v]irtual games simulate identities as citizen-soldiers, free-agent workers, cyborg adventurers…virtual play trains flexible personalities for flexible jobs, shapes subjects for militarized markets, and makes becoming a neoliberal subject fun’ (pp.xix-xxx). This rehearsal thesis has faced opposition. If interpellation does happen during play, Carr (2007) argues, perhaps there is no reason to assume that the potential interpellations posed by these various systems would be cumulative; it may be that they clash, or that they would be mutually affirming one moment but contradictory the next. The caution that Carr urges here is explored in the next chapter in relation to my formulation of distinct player typologies, which acknowledges the possibility that the subjectification at work cannot be assumed to be monolithic; indeed, the task will be to ascertain the divergence or convergence of the subjectification.
to model conflict scenarios in the Cold War (Kirkpatrick 2013, p.50). More broadly, Sicart (2009, p.68) has notably argued that ‘computer games are power structures; power creates subjects, and so games create players’.

There is, however, an ambiguity here pertaining to what is meant by ‘activities’ (and ‘rehearsal’, by extension): whether it denotes the virtual roaming, shooting, dying, trading, building, and psychic inhabitation of the role occupied by the game’s protagonist - the make-believe, identificatory, imaginative component of gaming; or whether it points to the interface navigation, speedy mouse-clicking, dexterous button-mashing, and in-front-of-screen sedentary proprioceptive calculation characteristic of physically and mentally playing a computer game. This division between imaginative, immersive investment into specific game-designated roles on the one hand, and the mental and physical skills actually required for gameplay is one that recalls the division into levels of hierarchy that Bogost (2009) attributed to the ludologists, with the player’s mental constructions being less real than the formal aspects of the games. There is greater complexity involved than this bipartite division, and is the subject of much dispute in game studies, but it will provisionally serve as the starting point from which to complicate the rehearsal thesis.

There are quite different kinds of competence at stake. The competences presupposed by computer games are more than interpretive competences that enable the reader or viewer to make sense of the text or image. By ‘competence’, I refer to Umberto Eco’s (1992) notion of the ‘social treasury’, or an encyclopaedia of cultural knowledge and conventions that the interpretation of a text falls within that is held by the reader. As Thomas Kuhn (1970, p.111) has noted, a contour map may be just lines on paper to a student but a picture of terrain to the cartographer, and a bubble-chamber photograph is nothing more than confused and broken lines to the student but a record of subnuclear events to the physicist. The contour map and the bubble-chamber photograph presume a certain competence from its viewer in order to decipher the information that it contains, rather than to see it as merely a series of aesthetically pleasing lines. What is required of the player of the computer game then, is action, or competences of playing, in addition to any competences of reading or seeing that are required to make sense of the texts or images within the game.67 There is of course a

67 There is a lot more that can be said about this topic. The line between competences of action and interpretation is not quite so clear-cut: computer games obviously also call for competences of ‘seeing’, particularly those in which players being able to keep track of all the on-screen, and potentially rather chaotic action, will be at an advantage, such
difference between the competence required to ‘unlock’ the text or game, and the 
competence that is honed by adhering to a particular pattern of action within it.

In other words, the ‘variable expressiveness’ of the nonlinear text, or what is 
being read from, is a separate matter to the ‘semantic ambiguity’, or what is being read, of 
the linear text (Aarseth 1997, p.3). In short, if a nonlinear cybertext is a machine for the 
production of variety of expression, it is effectively producing a variety of texts that are 
all understood to be emanations of that one cybertext that in turn are semantically 
ambiguous. In Cybertext, Aarseth had differentiated between leerstellen, or the semantic 
blanks and gaps in the text that the reader must fill in order to bring ‘the literary work 
into existence’, which he takes from Iser (1980, p.50), and the narrative vacancy of the 
adventure game, which must be filled by the reader for the ‘text’ to continue (Aarseth, 
1997, p.111); it could be conceived, as Mary Ann Buckles had (1985; 1987), as the 
difference between ‘aesthetic gaps’ and ‘narrative gaps’. Aarseth (1997, p.111) clarifies 
that the openings of determinate cybertexts are not strictly gaps, in Iser’s sense: ‘they are 
not used to complement the written parts in a game of imagination’; rather, they are 
used as filters or ‘keyholes’ that let through only the ‘correct’ response, which then 
enables the user to proceed.68

The competences of action required in ‘first-person shooter’ (FPS) games, for 
example, include, among other things, being able to quickly and accurately click at 
points on the screen on the basis of the visual information relayed. More fundamentally, 
the player needs to be able to make sense of their character’s position in space in a 
virtual environment, particularly in relation to the speed and distance of possible 
threats. On the subject of first-person shooters, Galloway (2006, p.69) has argued that 
‘it is the affective, active, mobile quality of the first-person perspective that is key for

68 Although interactive, ergodic, or aleatory literature changes the order of what is being 
read, they generally do not consist of complex systems in their own right the operation 
of which is discerned by means of a learning process with ongoing feedback loops. 
Examples include B.S. Johnson’s The Unfortunates (the booklets are to be shuffled, with 
the exception of the first and last ones) and Marc Saporta’s Composition I (150 unbound 
pages to be shuffled). Julio Corta’zar’s Hopscotch allows the reader to determine the 
order of the narrative elements or lexia. Lacking this procedural complexity, they do not 
create the sort of characteristic intense cybernetic circuit between the player and the 
game that we often see with computer games. For disagreements with Aarseth and 
Buckles, see (Karhulahti, 2015a).
gaming, not its violence’, as there is no simple connection, which is to say, necessary connection, between the first-person perspective and violent vision. In other words, the violence is the representational content or subject matter, whereas the ergodic mode of perception, the window onto the game world, and one that has become standardised even beyond the genre of FPS games, is the structure; a puzzle game such as Portal (Valve Corporation, 2007), boasts the same frame onto the game world as a standard shooter, but a very different kind of content.

Nevertheless, this is by no means to say that the former, the representation of violence, has no implications for the constitution of subjectivities. Galloway has compared the US Army designed America’s Army, in which the player plays as a soldier in the US Army, with two other FPS games that have originated in the Middle East: Under Ash and Special Force. The Syrian produced Under Ash (Dar Al-Fikr, 2001) has been noted as a response to the depiction of Arabs as the enemies in games like America’s Army, and features a young Palestinian man, Ahmed, as the protagonist, fighting against Israeli forces. Special Force (Hezbollah, 2003), is based on the armed Islamic movement in South Lebanon against the Israel Defense Forces. Mahmoud Rayya, an official from the Hezbollah bureau, has stated something closely resembling the ‘rehearsal thesis,’ that ‘Special Force offers a mental and personal training for those who play it, allowing them to feel that they are in the shoes of the resistance fighters’ (WND, 2003). As Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009, p.119) have noted, various commentators have recognised the similarity of Under Ash and its sequel, Under Siege, to FPS games made in the US, such as Full Spectrum Warrior (Pandemic Studios, 2004), but that the former were manufactured to directly counter the subjectification intended in Full Spectrum Warrior (hereafter ‘FSW’). However, they ‘do nothing to critique the formal qualities of the first-person shooter genre’, as Galloway (2006, p.82) points out; ‘the engine is the same, but the narrative is different’. Nevertheless, a different subject matter and an entirely different narrative can no doubt produce a correspondingly different kind of player subjectification – this is by no means surprising. My prerogative is not, however, to investigate the extent to which Under Ash or America’s Army might produce a certain kind of subjectivity in a Palestinian teenager or an American one, but to think about the shared ‘configurative practices’ involved in those games and beyond even the FPS genre. Given that they have a similar structure, in what way can they be said to function similarly with respect to subjectification via that structure? Narrative content is given to the player for them to interpret, but configurative practices enable
the player to actively pursue, or refrain from pursuing, various goals, and which lead to the foreclosure or opening up of further possibilities.

So the short disclaimer here is this: none of the above purports to deny that there might be trends to be discerned in the sorts of typical identities to be found in mainstream game characters, that criminals, shoppers and soldiers are nothing more than three arbitrary examples of gamic identities. There may, in fact, be certain secret affinities and connections between ergodic structure on the one hand, and representational and narrative content on the other, between algorithmic ontology, three-dimensional spatial modelling, military-simulational ancestry, and veritable subject matter. I also do not mean to omit acknowledgement of the fact that the subject matter of games can be powerfully constitutive of subjectivities, or that they do not stem from prevalent imaginaries orientated around, for example, war and conflict, the military/a lone soldier as the bulwark against an external threat, technological/magical dangers and salvations, the awakening of an ancient dormant enemy to threaten the status quo - and all the concomitant ideological baggage that this entails. But to underscore subjectification through gamic subject matter without having developed a convincing argument as to the nature of the inter-relatedness (or lack thereof) between subject matter and (procedural) structure, would appear to miss the point of how computer games might bring about subjectification in ways not akin to non-ergodic and representational texts such as films and comics. It is a moot point to assert that stories and representations in computer games matter, and function to interpellate certain subject positions, for that was never in doubt. Further, a game’s subject matter does not itself give players a choice between various patterns of action, even though it may on some level exert an influence. In this way, it plays a more ancillary role with regard to the practices of the self than does the structure of the game.

What is currently pertinent is the following. When Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter claim that playing Second Life is very much like living one’s ‘first’ life, their point seems to be rehearsal with regard primarily to the imaginative investment into the role, i.e., gamic subject matter: ‘[i]nhabitants of Second Life are, in other words, class-divided, property-owning, commodity-exchanging, currency-trading, networking, energy-consuming subjects of a comprehensively capitalist order. Welcome to your second-life - much like the first’ (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p.xii). This is further reinforced almost two hundred pages later on in a key passage:
Games are machines of “subjectivation.” When we play an in-game avatar, we temporarily simulate, adopt, or try out certain identities. Games, like other cultural machines, hail or “interpellate” us in particular “subject positions” (Althusser 1971)...such in-game identities are never entirely separated from the options provided by the actual social formations in which the games are set, from which their virtualities derive and into which they flow back. Game virtualities remove us from, but also prepare us for, these actual subject positions. Mostly, as we have discussed at length, they simulate the normalized subjectivities of a global capitalist order - consumer, commander, commanded, cyborg, criminal - not to mention the rapid shedding and swapping between identities that is such an important aptitude of workers in “flexible accumulation”. (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p.192).

However, what is arguably implicit in this claim about rehearsal is a view about what is accomplished by the ‘interactive’ or ‘ergodic’ nature of computer games. Namely, it is the mental and physical skills, the specific exertions called upon by gameplay that inculcate a deeper imaginative investment or immersion into the game-designated roles than would otherwise be possible with non-ergodic media. That is to say, the imaginative investment is predicated upon the skills and actions that are required and the invitation to the player to act. Interactivity, they claim, ‘intensifies the sense of free will necessary for ideology to work really well. Players, of their own choice, rehearse socially stipulated subjectivities...some games widely praised for their latitude – such as

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69 The term ‘subjectivation’ has been used here to denote the constitution of subjectivities without drawing attention to the associations it sometimes has with the freedom and autonomy of the subject – comparatively more so than the ‘subjection’ that has been connected with subjectivity, as we have seen. In The History of Sexuality, Volume II: The Use of Pleasure, for example, Foucault (1988 [1984], p.4) uses it as a ‘recognition’ through which the individual ‘constitutes itself as subject.’ It functions in ‘certain kinds of valutational practices according to teho like political frankness, Stoic apatheia, or Christian purity of heart’ (Flynn, 1985, p.534). He has also described it as indicating a regime of the subject’s relations to the truth in which the two are not externally bound, but ‘result from an irreducible choice of existence’ such that a ‘true subject was possible, therefore, no longer in the sense of subjection, but of subjectivation’ (Foucault, 2001b, p.511). However, it should be noted that Foucault’s usage was not always consistent.

70 There is potential work to be done here regarding the relationship, on the one hand, the engagement of the player qua player directly with the interface of the game, and on the other, the engagement of the player qua avatar with the objects in the game world. If the former is a comparatively more dispassionate engagement with the regularities of the game, then the latter is playing computer games as an immersive, embodied practice.
MMOs and sandbox games – are coded to constrain and channel toward imperial subject positions’ (ibid., pp.192-3). This idea resonates with Janet Murray’s (2012, p.102) view that ‘agency and immersion are mutually reinforcing’.

Identifying with a process

What appears *prima facie* obviously problematic with Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s claim that ‘they simulate the normalized subjectivities of a global capitalist order’ is the disjunction between being a commander or criminal, for example, in ‘real’, non-virtual, non-gamic life, and adopting the role of one within the specific rule-bound, user-friendly, affectively rewarding system of a computer game. Arguments may, no doubt, be produced to the effect that playing *Second Life* or *The Sims* resembles in some respects how one functions as an acquisitive consumer through the Internet: commodity-exchanging, currency-trading, point-and-click purchasing via tabs and icons. And serious simulation games, ranging from flying aircraft to racing cars to FPS games like *America’s Army*, boast demonstrable correspondences between the transferability of in-game skills to their simulated activities – being good at one makes you better at the other, especially if the controls that are used resemble the steering wheel, gearstick, etc. But to insist too fervently upon a correspondence between the subject positions of the contemporary precarious worker, for example, and in-game identities, which range from disembodied, near-omnipotent deities (*Black and White* (Lionhead Studios, 2001)), to element-wielding diminutive wizards (*Magicka* (Arrowhead Game Studios, 2011)), for example, is to overstate the case, to cite only examples convenient to the argument, and to elide the distinction – without having produced a relevant argument – between the real and the virtual. Part of the difficulty surely stems from the nebulous issue of whether it is straightforward what the assumed or adopted in-game identity may be; in a fighting game like *Streetfighter IV* (Dimps & Capcom, 2009) or *Tekken 6* (Bandai Namco

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71 Murray (1997, p.112) has made the case for the affordance of being able to use certain in-game objects over superior graphical representation in generating a greater sense of immersion. See also: Ermia and Mäyrä (2005, p.8) on the relationship between immersion and ‘challenge’, and Dovey and Kennedy (2006) on immersion and player skill.

72 Much can be said here about the plethora of ways in which games, or more accurately, simulations, are used as training tools for various jobs, and the vast amounts of money expended in order to make this the case.
Games, 2009), is the gamer actually an unseen external puppet master who manipulates their chosen character? In a card game like Magic: The Gathering Online (Leaping Lizard Software, 2002), is the gamer actually just playing the game as their own ‘real-world’ self, albeit in a digital format, or a fictional planeswalker? In a strategy game like Heroes of Might and Magic III (New World Computing, 1999) or Fallen Enchantress (Stardock, 2012), is the gamer a disembodied consciousness that guides their faction to victory, or the most powerful hero in that faction?73

We could note, in brief, some basic distinctions in games’ frame or perspective onto the game world, and which no doubt bears upon the issue of the kind of character identification at work.74 First, games in which the player assumes a stable character identity, often for the entire course of the game, as is often the case with many role-playing games, and which typically puts the player into a first-person perspective through which they view the gameworld. It is common, however, for the player in many RPGs to be also able to play in third-person, or in a scrolling top-down or side-scrolling format, but on this issue of perspective or frame onto the gameworld, these perspectives nevertheless incorporate the game character as a fixed constant in the centre of the screen. Second, there are games that allow the player to switch between various game characters, in which case the question of character identification is perhaps made much more open. The Streetfighter series (Capcom, 1987-2016), for example, is one that lets the player choose from a roster of characters for each match, although players will often be much more proficient with some characters over others. FSW also falls into this category, as we will see, since the player can see from the perspective of any member of two teams, Alpha and Bravo. Third, there are games that

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73 It is not my intention here to delve too deeply into the nuances of roleplaying; the basic point to be made here, however, is that insofar as accomplishing game actions is often starkly dissimilar to performing the ‘real’ actions that they represent, it would be unwarranted to state that the gamic subject position ‘rehearses’ the gamer for the ‘actual’ subject position. Along these lines, Kirkpatrick (2013, p.168) has noted that to achieve the outcomes we desire, ‘we do not think like a racing car driver or a magical elf, or a warehouseman – their problems are not the ones we engage with as we puzzle out what to do next and work on doing it fast enough.’

74 Here, I have chosen to focus on the different relationships between the player and their in-game character rather than on the different perspectives that the player may have onto the game world: first person; third person; side-view orthographic projection; top-down; axonometric projection (three kinds): isometric, where the y-axis is tilted 30 degrees; the planometric, where the y-axis is tilted 45 degrees from the horizontal; and the ¾ perspective. The interplay between what I have called the player’s relationship to their character, on the one hand, and the perspective, on the other, has a bearing on the resultant subjectification, but cannot be fully dealt with here.
do not position the player in relation to any obvious character-role, and which offer a generally top-down or isometric view of the game world, facilitating the player’s ability to scan over large areas of gamic space. Black and White (Lionhead Studios, 2001), and other ‘god games’ exemplify this category. Dungeon Keeper (Bullfrog Productions, 1999), however, is one of the most interesting examples insofar as it puts the player into the role of a disembodied dark power presiding over a subterranean realm, which it perceives in isometric or bird’s eye view, but which can temporarily ‘possess’ or inhabit the body of its dungeon minions and perceive the game world through its first-person perspective.

In the examples that they provide, and in their argument for the ‘rehearsal’ thesis, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter seem to be more focused on the first and second kind of gamic player-character relationship than on the third kind. This third kind complicates the character role, and thereby potentially problematises the idea that determinate subjectivities with concrete real-world counterparts are constituted. It is, if anything, indicative more of an engagement with informatics or process itself. In places, their own analysis of FSW actually provides ample grounds to show that the subjectification at work may be more complex than towards the determinate subject-position of a soldier. After acknowledging that the player’s in-game position is complex, they write that:

One can switch from leader of Alpha to that of Bravo and back again. And if it is necessary to get a specific line of site on an enemy position, one can “see” from the position of any member of the team. So it could be said that the player’s implied position is that of a “ninth” officer, invisible and invulnerable.

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75 It is likely that the player will, over the course of the game, come to care emotionally about the fate of the fictional team members, and by extension, have a changed perspective on the dangers faced by American soldiers abroad – the members’ backstories are emotively presented (it is of course also possible to feel estranged from them). The diverse background of the team members in the game contributes to a narrative that signifies the unified ideals of fighting for freedom and democracy that are shared across different communities and social classes. It is perhaps in this sense, as conveyed narratively and representationally, that we can most suitably interpret Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s (2009, p.100) assertion that FSW promulgates the socialisation necessary for populations to endure and endorse the conditions for an interminable war, and that ‘games such as FSW generate subjectivities that tend to war’ (ibid., p.118). The complex geopolitical story to FSW that that is composed from any number of substitutable ‘CNN reports, news photos, and movies’, serves to deaden the emotional reaction to war and to produce the politically expedient outcomes (ibid., p.105).
commanding both fire teams. Ultimately the player of $FSW$ has a trans-individual position, the consciousness of a collective military entity (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p.106).

In this way, $FSW$ no doubt trains the player to comprehend military situations with a sophisticated tactical verve that would exceed confinement to one first or third-person perspective, and to experiment with the game as a simulation in which the components that can be tweaked include the positions of all the soldiers on two teams, as opposed to, for example, the accuracy of fire of a particular soldier: it is in this way that the game could also be said to be trans-individual. Drawing upon Jordan Crandall’s (2004, cited in Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009, p.109) conception of ‘vertical perspective’, which is concerned with looking downwards rather than sideways, and which is in origin an optic of surveillance and command, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter note that each loading of $FSW$ opens with a vertical perspective typical of the optic of military command scoping the battlefield. Further, at any moment, the player can press a button to access another mode of vertical perspective, by obtaining a view via his Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver. What is at stake for the player is an interplay between vertical and horizontal perspectives that is effectively utilised to make the most suitable tactical decisions. Alpha and Bravo teams can use the vertical perspective to gain information, but can also use their horizontal perspective to spot targets, which would otherwise be vertically hidden, for air or artillery strikes.

Can it be said, then, that the gaming subjectivity that is inculcated is actually in excess of the kind of soldier-citizen that is strictly required to function in combat situations? This claim would need to be qualified insofar as training for soldiers today relies upon various interface technologies that are designed to enhance and augment their awareness of the battlefield. Yet even if there is a conjunction of the technologies for gaming and for war, perhaps this means that it is no more true to declare that the gaming subjectivity is a military subjectivity than it is to hold that the military subjectivity is a gaming subjectivity, at least in their resort to a form of tactical thinking that is enabled by various technologies.\(^7\)

\(^7\)The veracity of $FSW$ as a simulation of war has been cast into doubt: the Army version has been criticised as an inadequate representation of conflict training because floor-to-floor house clearing did not exist in the game (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p.114).
Switching between perspectives is germane to many computer games. Friedman (1999, Simulation and Subjectivity: para. 4) has noted that the *SimCity* (Maxis, 1989) manual refers to the player’s role as a ‘combination of Mayor and City Planner’ even though the player is ‘responsible for far more than any one leader – or even an entire government – could ever manage’. It is possible to see playing *SimCity* as a ‘constant shifting of identifications, depending on whether you’re buying land, organizing the police force, paving the roads, or whatever’ (ibid., para.7). However, although Friedman thinks that this is what is going on, he believes there to be no disjunction in the shifting; it is smooth and trance-like in the moment of gameplay. There is something that overarches these shifts, and that is ‘a more general state of identification: with the city as a whole, as a single system’ (ibid.). It is an identification with a *process* rather than with a *role*, an internalisation of the logic of the program itself, so that the player is able to anticipate the results of their actions in the dynamic system – a form of systems cognition. Insofar as the shedding and swapping between identities in *FSW* is similarly seamless, then it is also about the player’s identification with a process.

Kirkpatrick (2011, p.79) has argued that gamers cannot identify so strongly with their in-game character as to jeopardise their mastering of the game, which calls for a requisite detachment in a way that parallels ‘Diderot’s paradox’, in which an actor cannot only experience and express feelings intensely in order to produce them in an audience but must have recourse to artifice and attend to the performance. This fact ‘illustrates a fundamental aesthetic problem with the idea of a straightforward (tension and paradox free) immersion in virtual space and fictional role play’ (ibid.).

77 Daniel Vella (2015, p.268, emphases in original) has recently explored another take on this disjunction, surmising that ‘the playable figure is attributed the status of both *self* and *other*, and is related to both *subjectively* and *objectively*.’

78 There is a broader point to be made about game perspective becoming naturalised as part of our absorption of the full panoply of game conventions. This lies beyond the scope of the thesis, but Kirkpatrick (2012) has looked into how gaming secured for itself a status as a distinctive cultural practice, which requires the gamers to have become familiar with a set of conventions. He notes that the UK gaming magazines of the 1980s struggled to find the language needed to express the relationship between the player and their on-screen avatar. They often resorted to referring to gamers’ on-screen characters as ‘your little man,’ a formulation that would later be deemed clumsy in the 1990s once ‘the assumed gap between the body of the player and their on-screen representative has been closed, so that ‘you’ (the gamer) simply ‘play as a worm’, or ‘you are driving a rig’ (CVG 169 December 1995)’ (Kirkpatrick, 2012, para.54). The concept of ‘gameplay’ marks the point at which gaming bids for autonomy as a cultural practice and subsequently it becomes the philosopher’s stone of game creation: it is the enigmatic mark of value that designers compete over…there are no clear criteria that
Rather than simulating actions that have a real-life counterpart, it may be more accurate to say that a significant part of many games are more about navigating and configuring menus as part of the player’s identification with a process. For Galloway (2006), a key part of what makes up computer games are their nondiegetic elements, which re-iterates the disjunction between the gamic competences required, and the competences actually required for the actions represented in the game. ‘The diegesis of a video game’, he writes, ‘is the game’s total world of narrative action’ whilst ‘nondiegetic play elements are those elements of the gaming apparatus that are external to the world of narrative action’ (Galloway, 2006, p.7). The latter includes the heads-up display (HUD) in Deus Ex (Ion Storm, 2000), or pressing the Pause button in a game. They consist of, firstly, ‘nondiegetic operator acts,’ or acts of configuration. These ‘setup’ actions exist in all games, ‘[t]hey are the interstitial acts of preference setting, game configuration, meta-analysis of gameplay, loading or saving, selecting one player or two, and so on. The pause and cheat acts are both part of this category’ (ibid., p.13). And for some games, these acts of configuration constitute the very site of gameplay, with Civilization (MPS Labs, 1991) cited as an example. Secondly, there are ‘nondiegetic machine acts,’ or those enacted by the computer itself. These can be defined as: those elements that create a generative agitation or ambiguity – what Genette calls metalepsis – between the inside of the game and the outside of the game, between what constitutes the essential core of the game and what causes that illusion (literally, “in-play”) to be undone (ibid., p.34). Even power-ups and health packs, which are arguably incorporated into the narrative of the game, may fall under this category. It is certainly possible to blur the particular distinctions that Galloway makes between the diegetic and nondiegetic, but it stands that in computer game play, a central component lies in the mastery of aspects that are concerned with manipulating menus, or understanding the effects of processes that perhaps break the illusion of the game, such as a save point or loading screen. But some gamers either do not see nondiegetic machine acts as breaking the illusion of the game, or have become so accustomed to oscillating between different states of mind that play is generally not interrupted – their experience of ‘flow’ is not disrupted. Yet nor do gamers think of playing the game as an unbroken narrative sequence – a few hours may pass by with a steady progression of the game’s narrative, would enable us to measure its presence (ibid., para.51). In the formation of a field, the relationship of the gamer’s body to the gaming apparatus had to become invisible, constituting a new kind of habitus, in order that the ‘characteristic sensations of gameplay could form the basis of gaming’s illusio’ (ibid., para.55).
only to be succeeded by several hours of frustrating failure at a particular juncture, in which all attention turns on being able to execute the correct sequence of inputs in the right order. Even in a game like *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009), a third-person survival horror game in which the player takes on the role of soldier-citizen Chris Redfield or Sheva Aloma, and which is a far cry from the heavy emphasis on configurative play typical of non-character focused games like *Civilization V* (Firaxis Games, 2010), there is a great deal of inventory management involved in the total play time of the game (or ‘nondiegetic operator acts’) as players deliberate over what to carry in the limited inventory space that they have. Players also learn a technique (an ‘act of configuration’), intended by the designers, that is typical of the *Resident Evil* series: that combining ammunition with the appropriate weapon in the inventory menu circumvents the slow reload animation that they would have to go through in the diegesis of the game, and that this can make all the difference in a difficult battle.

**Thinking like a computer**

Thus, the prevalence of the nondiegetic not only further challenges the rehearsal thesis, but the nondiegetic acts of configuration point towards the actions that are in fact required by computer games. The configurative aspects of the game foreground to us various causal processes, and require us to think in terms of the categories, distinctions, groupings, combinations, values, and consequences. Ted Friedman (1999; 2005) has argued that playing a computer trains one to ‘think like a computer’, rather than a particular kind of subject. This evidently refers to what is demanded of the player by the game in terms of competences of action, or of being able to think through the stages of various processes, rather than the imaginative investment involved. It is something that has also been picked out by James Newman (2002), who has commented that one plays a computer game to learn how to ‘think like a computer’.

79 Friedman does not think that simulation games have characters and plot in any conventional narrative sense. Further, players of those games identify with the overall causal processes of the game, rather than with particular characters in the game; the primary narrative agent in these games is ‘geography’ and he goes on to call these games ‘spatial stories’ or cognitive maps.

80 It was Les Levidow and Kevin Robins (1989, p.159) who used the phrase, ‘military information society’, to propose that the military has played a key role in the spread of computer culture, and that human qualities not easily reducible to ‘computer metaphors’
Friedman (2005, p.139) proposes that computer games have the potential to communicate new and different ‘structures of thought’ by getting the player to ‘internalize the logic of the program’ (ibid., p.137). This is an intrinsically cybernetic process, since the constant feedback between player and simulation is the core mechanism through which ‘the line demarcating the end of the player’s consciousness and the beginning of the computer’s world blurs’ (ibid., p.138).

Friedman has drawn on the work of game designers such as Will Wright and Chris Crawford (1986) to develop his view of playing digital games as a form of ‘systems cognition’: the player comes to see and experience their own actions in relation to a greater systemic whole. Since the player is required to comprehend a myriad of complex interrelationships in order to understand how to complete the game, they become subsequently equipped, once the game is over, with a ‘new template with which to interpret, understand and cognitively map’ (cited in Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009, p.220) the ‘city’ around them. On this point, Torben Grodal (2003) has differentiated between two different forms of player engagement with a game. One is the ‘game as an experiential route’, whilst the other, echoing Friedman, is the ‘game as a map and as a system’. The player, according to Grodal, moves from the first to the second kind of perspective through the course of mastering the game. Eventually, the player may be able to experience the game not as a series of routes but is able to mentally create a total map of the game, which reveals to them the connections between all options and consequences. Experienced players may be able to get to that second stage more quickly, and shift more deftly between perceiving the game as an experiential

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are disavowed or redefined along such lines. Human limitations are to be overcome through the pervasiveness of ‘[c]omputer-based models of war, work and learning [which] can promote military values, even when they apparently encourage the operator to ‘think’” (cited in Crogan, 2011, pp.90-91)(emphasis added, p.159). Newman and others’ take on the simile of ‘thinking like a computer’ are less oriented towards the militaristic, but can also be seen to grapple with the homogenising effects of a pervasive technoculture on the structures of our thought.

It is, however, somewhat disputable whether all games boast such causal complexities; the spatial geometry of Tetris that Friedman mentions, with the affordance of rotating the falling shapes, seems comparatively trivial when judged against the rivulets and tributaries of effects and consequences in a game like Civilization V, in which a single judgement over occupying a hex with a particular luxury resource, for example, can have profound ripple effects through the course of the game. Many such effects are so difficult to fathom in their entirety that there is often no clearly optimal move to make, whereas this is much less likely to be case with Tetris. This point, however, does not challenge the view that players can come to see very different kinds of games in terms of their being systems, but it does raise the question concerning the various complexities and whether ‘system’ is insufficiently specific.

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world and as a map of what Grodal (2003, p.144) thinks are the possible intentions laid down by the creators. That is to say, some players may be able to conceive of the various ‘layers’ of the game more fluently, and can enjoy the representational qualities of, for example, a giant in *Skyrim*, as well as intuiting that it will likely face ‘pathing’ problems, due to its size, in trying to reaching the player if they decide to stand on a large rock and shoot at it with spells and arrows. Although it may be difficult for the player to conceive of the branching pathways of every dialogue option and result in an extended RPG like *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware, 2009): whether it leads to a fight, to loot, to experience, or to increased or decreased approval amongst certain party members, one may nevertheless be able to gain a picture of the significant forks in the labyrinth of the game.②

Describing this bottom-up process of systems cognition, Bernard Perron (2006, pp.65-66) has developed an ‘heuristic circle of gameplay’. While playing a video game, the gamer has to go in circles around the questions or the challenges that the game poses, accumulating information about the causal consequences of various actions. This is then further developed by Arsenault and Perron (2009, p.114) into their concept of the ‘magic cycle’:

> At first, right after the game’s output, he must analyse the information available to him (while keeping in mind as well the potential future states of the game) through his perceptual and cognitive activity, which relies on the bottom-up (data-driven) and top-down (concept-driven) processes. If the unfolding of the action is new and it is difficult to predict what will come next, the gamer will rely more on images, sounds, and/or force-feedback in trying to make sense of such a situation. The bottom-up process will be dominant. But if the beginning of the action matches a general knowledge schema (context) or a generic schema (learned from past experience of other texts – co-texts), the top-down process takes the lead and the gamer will look for a confirmation of his expectations.

Usually, the first step is to learn the consequences of pressing the various buttons. Later on, the player will have noticed more complex causal and other regularities. Sebastian

② Alison Gazzard (2013, pp.17-18) has also conceived of this mental mapping in spatial terms, describing the game as a ‘maze’ that can be viewed as a ‘design’, as though from above and in its entirety, or as an ‘experience,’ as though one is wandering through it.
Genvo (2009, p.140) has observed that on a website dedicated to *Pac-Man*, the traits of each ghost are listed. Blinky, the red ghost, for example, increases his speed when there are just twenty dots left, which is something that would take a lot of play, observation, and testing for the player to discover. On the basis of their observations, the player progressively constructs a mental model of the inner workings of the game with which to inform their gamic actions; there is a feedback loop (cf. Heaton, 2006; Cook, 2007) between first, the player’s testing of the validity of their model and the actions that they take on the assumption that it is true, and second, the audiovisual feedback given to them by the game in response to their actions, which may prompt further refinement or hypothesising. As the player’s mental model gains sophistication, there is a shift in the ‘experience of the game’, from a ‘pre-dominantly bottom-up processes, where individual elements are analysed before reacting, to top-down processes, where a mental image of the game system guides the gamer’s reactions and expectations’ (Arsenault & Perron, 2009, p.126). Friedman describes this process, of learning to play the computer game, as one of ‘demystification’ in which ‘one succeeds by discovering how the software is put together; the player molds her or his strategy through trial-and-error experimentation to see “what works” – which actions are rewarded and which are punished’ (Friedman, 1999, Computer Gaming as Demystification, para. 4).

A brief note should be added about ‘time-critical’ (Karhulahti, 2013) games, in which it is usually not sufficient that the player constructs and utilises detailed mental

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83 However, the authors warn that there is a gap between the real algorithm or system, and how it appears to the player as a series of regularities, i.e., we cannot grasp the system itself. Taking Manovich’s example, they note that when a gamer finds that an enemy in *Quake* (Id Software, 1996) will always appear from the left, ‘he still only witnesses the repetitive result of the computer’s response to his action. He does not, per se, discover the game’s algorithm which remains encoded, hidden and multifaceted’ (Arsenault & Perron, 2009, p.110) from the graphics of the game. It is not that the cognitive map is an inaccurate grasp of the underlying algorithms, but that there remains a gap between them. The authors also give the example of players’ calculation of the drop rate of an item in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2005) being based on an unreliable grasp of the real algorithms, and premised on the assumption that the drop rate was not changed in a subsequent patch (ibid., pp.124-125) – this is the difference between the system and the system image. This point is echoed by Andreas Gregersen (2005), who draws on Norman’s (1986) distinction between the ‘system,’ which is the total functional system, and ‘system image’, which refers to only the visible parts of the system available for information pick-up. Interestingly, Gregersen (2005, section 4, para.1) argues that the ability to see something as ‘an indicator of system performance (and thus in some sense see it as part of the system image) varies between individuals – professionals can often tell things about systems that lay people are not able to see.’
maps; both ‘analytical and implementation skills are needed’ (Arsenault & Perron, 2009, p.122, emphasis added). The cognitive dimension does not encompass a good handling of the controller and being able to enter the time-critical inputs with precision, although it will inform which inputs to enter in the appropriate situation. In some games, the implementation skills may be more central and more difficult to fully master than the ability to comprehend all the nuances of what is occurring. The rhythms of play, the pleasure of toggling the left and right move buttons with sufficient precision for one’s character to walk along a narrow ledge without falling, for example, or being able to perfectly block an enemy’s attack, may be more crucial. It is difficult, however, to make general statements about time-critical skills. In fighting games, a series of precise button inputs are required, for King’s chain throws in *Tekken 6*, for example. In other games, the player has to have the ability to spread their attention so that many parts of the screen, such as movements on the separate mini-map, the direction of incoming fire in the distance, the position of enemies behind cover, are all simultaneously monitored yet only given a minimal level of attention until something of immediate interest presents itself. Alternatively, there may be the need to tap into prior memorised routines or combinations. In real-time strategy (RTS) games like *Age of Mythology* (Ensemble Studios, 2002), there will be a ‘build-order’ that will vary depending on the map that one has been allocated, if map selection was put onto ‘random’ – this will need to be recalled, implemented, and improvised upon, without delay. Being able to combine analyses together with implementation requires emotional discipline, it is the hallmark of an adept player to be able to calmly process and then execute the suitable response.

The dimension of cognitive mapping combines with the player’s own bodily habitus and time-critical gamic skill to culminate in a particular disposition towards the game as manifested in the strategies employed. Players often intuitively adopt a manageable strategy that is within their skill ability and then instinctively repeat and adapt it as necessary; given the variability of all the factors involved, these strategies tend to be particular to the player in question.

The record-breaking speed-run, completing a *Resident Evil* game with just a knife, playing through *DA: Inquisition* with a party of one rather than the recommended four, or exploiting glitches to accomplish fantastic or ridiculous results: all of these gameplay feats require very precise understandings of the games in question even before factoring in the skill-based component. They are only made possible by the player’s near-perfect understanding of the machinic operations, and attest to the pleasure that
players derive from attaining that understanding. The result of this is that the game is ‘demystified,’ shorn from any initial claim it may have laid to gritty realism or mimetic fidelity – the gravitas of confronting a monster in a survival horror game that is meant to threaten the played character’s survival and exhaust their stock of ammunition and healing supplies is greatly diminished once one knows how to safely poke at it with their most ineffectual and insulting weapon, without the need to expend any resources or ammunition. This foments a vexed relationship between gameplay and subject matter since the challenge of the analytical component of these games (as well as the time-critical play) often conflicts with the game’s representational or narrative aspects, and even with the intended atmosphere.

The aesthetic of the *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011) series is to feel the precariousness of surviving in a dark fantasy world where monstrous beings seem to dwarf the player in power, and can casually kill with wild, flailing strokes of their weapons or limbs. The difficulty of the game seems to reflect the sense of hopelessness conveyed by the narrative. And indeed the odds of success are slim until the player is able to discern the minute differences between enemies’ attacks; not simply the obvious difference between, say, a behemoth’s area-of-effect ground stomp and a retreating swipe, but between an armed combatant’s forward swipe that hits in a full 180 degree arc and one that might be executed faster yet with a narrower arc. The player will need to hypothesise, for example, how many hits they can connect onto a particular boss after it has been exposed following an attack: too many and they will not be able to evade the retaliation; too few and the boss fight is extended, exposing the player to more risks. In this sense, enemies are defeated by patient observation, experimentation of techniques, and then by routine. As such, the *Dark Souls* aesthetic exists in tension with the structure of learning in computer game play. There is a contrast between, on the one hand, enemies whose patterns the player has already mastered, and who consequently pose little threat except for any carelessness on the part of the player, and the majestic terror of seemingly undefeatable new opponents (whose patterns have not yet been comprehended by the player) on the other. Bosses come to be subsequently revealed to be rule-governed automatons that are to be deciphered as puzzles. Perhaps the player will even see the pixels as so much extraneous stuff that do not exactly correspond to where the physical ‘hitboxes’ actually are in the binary consideration of

84 The Capra Demon boss, for example, has six different attacks, which is actually rather low of a typical boss: left-hand sweep, right-hand then left-hand sweep, right-hand sweep, left-hand smash, jumping smash, two-handed sweep.
either being in range of an attack or being safely out of its range. Consequently, playing *Dark Souls* is arguably characterised more by the frustration of ‘slipping up’ against identified enemies that should not pose any threat than by the filmic trope of desperate confrontation against insurmountable odds followed by eventual triumph.

What the magic cycle and cognitive mapping bring out is the fact that the degree of our understanding of the game, which impinges upon the way that we play it, is up to us. The speed with which a player tests hypotheses to discover how things work, and the way in which they utilise this information, leads to the difference between a theorycrafting power gamer and a casual player with a basic grasp of the mechanics. This kind of loop often happens more intuitively, in the time-critical rhythms of gameplay, than is implied by the belaboured description above, but players are assured that any dogged determination on their part to uncover the workings of the game will most assuredly be met with success not only due to the designers almost certainly having created the game to be decipherable in such a way, but also due to the intrinsic algorithmic character of games, their ‘if x, then y’ character. This constitutes part of the appeal of games since for some, the certainty of being able to comprehend its workings promises mastery to the player at a future time, following a rewarding process of rapid improvement and intensive learning that inculcates feelings of achievement. That is to say, there is the promise of intelligibility.

The game conceived in its totality as a series of components defined by particular pre-set causal relations to one another rather than as an experience, is a distinction that refers once again to their ambivalent status as object-processes; viewing

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85 This point about the separation between the symbolic level and the gameplay has already been made. Regarding the *McDonald’s Videogame* (Molleindustria, 2006), ‘In order to be successful in the game, the player has to plow the rainforest and demolish villages; feed the cows genetically-altered grains mixed with industrial waste, and also feed the cows with dead cows, later covering up bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE)…the player must try to be cost-effective in the burger restaurant, firing ineffective staff, and rewarding the do-gooders’ (Konzack 2009, pp.41-42). Since it is possible to make the firm sustain healthy profits for many decades, even centuries, into the future – a feat that is by no means straightforward – a resultant feeling of accomplishment may be induced. But this is only possible because the meaning, or symbolic level, has been banished (Kirkpatrick, 2011, p.223).

86 There are other ways, however, to circumvent the aesthetic. The series has often included shortcuts to defeating bosses, or even to playing the game as a whole – playing a magic user who kites enemies around whilst firing ranged projectiles does not require the player to learn enemies’ attacks with precision. The Capra Demon, for example, can be beaten without actually stepping into the boss arena if one has a bow and some firebombs with which to attack it from a bridge.
A game as a system is perhaps to see it as an ergodic object with particular properties that can be catalogued once one has gone through it as an experience. Although this division is a fragile one in terms of articulating the experience of playing the game, since the player may at any time be engaged in the activity of cataloguing as they are playing, it is one that has crucial political resonances for many commentators. For Friedman, the systems cognition or template that the player would subsequently develop was the aspect that was of most interest, being a significant form of cognition charged with political resonances in an age of globalised capitalism. Friedman, of course, as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009, p.220) remind us, takes the term ‘cognitive mapping’ from Fredric Jameson (1991, cited in Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p.220), who argued that under globalized capital, a prerequisite for oppositional political movements is ‘an aesthetics of cognitive mapping, a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system’. For Jameson (1991, p.51), an essential problem of political action is the intelligibility of the world itself; subjects need to comprehend their own situation or position: they require the means to make a ‘cognitive map’. Following globalisation, we can no longer, as we once could under an earlier phase of capitalism, extrapolate from our local experiences in order to develop a map of the global economic system that determined them, which is a failure that produces a sense of alienation from a world that we do not find intelligible. The present historical contradiction is one ‘in which the truth of our social life as a whole – in Lukács’ terms, as a totality – is increasingly irreconcilable with the possibilities of aesthetic expression or articulation available to us’ (Jameson, 1992, p.54). Jameson compares the situation of the individual in late capitalist society to that of being in a postmodern urban landscape, ‘a space in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves’ (Jameson, 1991, p.51). The cognitive map, then, is enlisted ‘to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole’ (ibid.). The difficulty of cognitive mapping, it may be said, reflects the difficulty of grasping the present with respect to a critical ontology of ourselves.

As Aarseth (2001, para.5) has remarked, ‘[g]ames are both object and process, they can’t be read as texts or listened to as music, they must be played’.

That is to say, not in physical relation to a city, but projected outwards to a higher level and more complex level, in a way that converges with Althusser and Lacan’s redefinition of ideology as ‘the representation of the subject’s Imaginary relationship to
The notion of cognitive mapping ‘hinges on a dialectic of immediate perception and imaginative or imaginary conception’, which is our ability to extrapolate from the mental map we have of our immediate perceptible situation to a larger imaginary spatial context (Homer, 1998, p.139). If viewing computer games as a total system is reminiscent of cognitive mapping, and of the political emancipation that it connotes, then the argument could be that playing games trains us to become more adept at conceiving of how our own experiences fit within a larger system, or social space.\textsuperscript{89} We are trained to be political subjects. The possibility is not entertained, however, that some facet of this very ability to view or to conceive of the whole system may be itself potentially malign. Galloway has read cognitive mapping in relation to computer games quite differently. Also building on Friedman’s work, he agrees that the systems thinking, in the case of \textit{Civilization}, is one where ‘the gamer is not simply playing this or that historical simulation’ but is ‘learning, internalizing and becoming intimate with a massive, multipart global algorithm...To win means to know the system’ (2006, pp.90-91).\textsuperscript{90} In short, one conforms by thinking in such a way that enables one to understand the system and how to situate oneself within it advantageously – this is the instrumental end of the learning process. What is particularly novel about computer games, for Galloway, is that this process is effected so transparently. A game like \textit{Civilization} makes no effort to hide what it demands from the player – learning its hidden logic and executing its algorithm, in the words of Lev Manovich (2001, p.222), or internalising the logic of the program, in the words of Friedman – behind a veil. The process is nothing other than the presentation of ‘contemporary political realities in relatively unmediated form’; computer games do not sublimate political control as does the cinema, but makes

\textsuperscript{89} The kinds of connections made that constitute the game as a system are still attached to images, sounds, temporalities, rhythms, and even atmospheres. This is what makes the game system distinct from mapping out an adventure book, for example, in one’s head. It is not a mere series of abstract branching pathways, but the association of certain sounds with actions and events. This point will require more space to articulate than is available here, but I will return to it at the end of chapter four.

\textsuperscript{90} Nevertheless, Galloway’s characterisation does not emphasise when players have come to understand the game’s procedures and are in some way dissatisfied with them, leading to modding and to game forum discussions appealing to the developers to change the rules, to the adoption of informal rules among players themselves and any number of other tactics.
it coterminous with the entire game – it is this that allows them to achieve ‘a unique type of political transparency’ (Galloway, 2006, p.92).

However, it is important to state that we can only arguably map or represent something that is comparatively trivial when measured against the complexity of contemporary reality. This triviality is essential to gameness and to our ludic attitude, to our not feeling overwhelmed: we have to feel like we are learning at an accelerated rate and that we are making significant progress when it comes to the magic cycle. As such, what would it mean for us to take what we have learned from cognitive mapping in games, to use the adeptness with which we do so, and to apply it to comprehend our own situation in the world? If there was indeed a fundamentally ludic orientation with respect to the game, does this require that we see life and the world as a game, which arguably involves no small amount of cynicism in order to deconstruct them in the same manner? Instead of being subtly influenced to see the world in light of mechanics that are not made clear to them (Starr 1994; Friedman, 1999), once the game has been comprehended by the players, its limitations and design flaws are made all too clear (Crawford, 1986). In place of an aesthetics of cognitive mapping that leaves us with a renewed sense of how to gauge the world, there is perhaps an aesthetics or connoisseurship of the gap between the processes represented and their real-world referents, of how the particular processes within games are deficient for the purposes of enabling us to comprehend the world.

In this way, that there is something of significant political import that we can take away is unclear in view of the questions concerning what it is that we map or learn and the relation between that process and object of knowledge to the world. Even though something is being learned, and the game is being mentally mapped, it is difficult to generalise about what it is that is taught by computer games. There are a range of opinions on this point. James Paul Gee (2003) has celebrated the type of learning required by digital games as ‘close to what I believe are the best theories of learning in cognitive sciences’, given that it calls for what he terms ‘embodied understanding’ (ibid., p.91), in which players probe, hypothesise, reprobe and think. He believes that digital games have the potential to encourage the development of critical thinking skills that can be applied in other contexts given that players engage in ‘critical learning’, which is superior to ‘passive’ or ‘active’ learning (ibid., p.40). Gee’s exposition of the learning dynamic in games – exploration, automation, and adaptation (ibid., p.70) – are ones that Kirkpatrick (2013, p.183) views as common to all learning situations, and
mirrors a similar schema given by Nielsen (2010), of ‘habituation, naturalization, decoupling, and rehabituation’. Others, however, would argue that the critical learning skills acquired while playing digital games do not necessarily transfer into other contexts and that learning in/with digital games is not necessarily educationally worthwhile (Buckingham and Sefton-Green 2003). As Kerr (2006, p.140) argues, ‘[t]here is very little evidence as yet to support the claim that the critical learning skills which may be used in certain games are transferable to other contexts’. Provenzo (1991, p.34), carefully makes the narrow claim that videogames are literally teaching machines that instruct the player in their rules.

Learning the game intricately and demystifying it is often driven by nothing more than our wanting to do as well as possible in it. The idea that players are made to conform by being given an objective, which is ‘to perform well’, has been raised by other commentators, such as Behrenhausen (2007, p.339), who connects this with the lack of overarching narratives in games, and Kirkpatrick (2013, p.175), who writes that ‘we struggle to understand and overcome one set of challenges only to be presented with another’ – it is difficult to ‘offer an alternative thematization of experience’.91 Becoming proficient at understanding the ways that things work, being the type of player who has a virtuoso ability to get through the magic cycle and figure out which gamic actions are beneficial towards achieving which desired result, is not necessarily coterminous with being able to think how things could be different, or, for that matter, willing them to be different. In fact, quite the opposite may be the case. As such, the process of the learning cycle does not necessarily assist a wandering away from the self, especially when understood as symptomatic of a context in which individuals merely strive to do well for themselves within the existing system. As Kirkpatrick (2013, p.186) asks, does the learning concern ‘alterations we perpetrate upon ourselves through our engagement with it’, which changes our sense of what is possible, or does it simply integrate people ‘more effectively into a paranoid rat-race’?92

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91 Carstens and Beck (2005, pp.22-23) have argued that ‘[g]amers are more likely to believe that ‘winning is everything’ and ‘competition is the law of nature’ than non-gamers”.

92 It is possible to make the case that mapping is, in itself, integrating. Pasi Väliaho (2014, p.132) draws upon the work of various neuroscientists to argue that our neural maps, which are the patterns of interconnection that represent things and events in the external world or in the body, are mercurial, being redrawn upon the experience of successions of events, and the mapping is ‘not only embodied, temporal and dynamic, but also selective and imaginative, discriminatory and categorizing’ (ibid.), depending on the various value systems that selectively cut and compose the mind’s imagery. Väliaho
On the other hand, it is premature to attempt to divorce the exercise of the imagination and the sense of new possibilities from a keen understanding of how things work. The latter is necessary in terms of providing a foundational knowledge and grounding such that the former does not take the form of the merely fanciful and fantastic; through the use of understanding or reason, the imagination can be better guided to fruition. This point will be further developed in chapter five. In this regard, cognitively or analytically mapping the game takes on some positive elements when seen as resonating with the *ascesis* of the ancient practices of the self, particularly the elements that focused on obtaining an understanding of the world. What Lucretius, for example, called the *veridical dicta*, the true and rational ‘discourses’ or *logoi*, were needed for us to equip ourselves in the pursuit of the practices of the self; and theoretical knowledge, knowing the principles that govern the world, was prized by the Epicureans as indispensable for preparing oneself for the possible events of life (Foucault, 2005, p.500). Only when one had possession of this knowledge and the disposition to seek it could one go about the task of self-transformation or stylisation. This speaks to the interplay between the pragmatic and the transgressive, or, in relation to the critical ontology of ourselves, between the ‘truth’ of what is real and the exercises of freedom. It is significant that what is learned is put into practice by the player, which then progresses the cycle of learning. The ancient practices had stipulated that in addition to the possession of knowledge about the world, it was necessary for the true discourses to be *prokheiron ekhein*, or ready to hand and available to be called upon. They must be so well internalised that ‘one assimilates it to the point of making it a part of oneself, an internal, permanent, and always active principle of action’ (ibid.). This resonates with the training needed to seamlessly weld together the analytical and implementation skills.

After rejecting the multitude of claims concerning what it is that computer games train us for, in the most minimal sense, we learn that the impetus to engage with the spiralling nature of game-learning comes from ourselves. The content of what is trained or learned, and its broader significance, remains debatable. The significance of the means by which the knowledge is obtained by the player lies in its resonance with, as I mentioned in the introduction, the new modality of power, which relies upon subjectification, on the impetus originating from within us. This brings us to the

(2014, p.133) has argued that ‘mapping can be seen as an ontological and epistemological practice that integrates the microcosm of the brain with the macrocosm of the world’. In other words, by the time one has understood the game’s rules, one is already integrated; one then thinks in terms of those rules.
practices of the self, as discussed in the previous chapter. Such practices cannot be completely captured by power relations, and they lead us, according to Foucault, to a form of ‘truth’ that is *irreducible* to an epistemology suited to the perpetuation of that form of power. What we learn in games through a series of practices has a personal quality of discovery to it, and in this way we are invested into the game’s procedures, or ‘feel’ of the game. It is not necessarily unique to us, but it is also often difficult to anticipate in advance. What is being taught or reinforced is, as we will see, a process of ‘ethopoiesis’, which can take the form of, among other things, an experimental attitude or a rational mindset. Causal relations within the game are actively learned at the player’s pace, and different relations are learned by different players depending on the respective trajectories that they have taken. Here, I return to the work of Foucault in order to explicate his concepts of ‘truth’ and ‘ethopoiesis’, which bear on the way in which contemporary computer games bring us to formulate and understand our relation to a ‘truth’ in a non-coercive fashion, and in a manner that seems particular to us. In this sense, they appear to be isomorphic with a form of ‘government by the truth’.

**Subjectification and the active relationship to ‘truth’**

By 1980, after his lectures *On the Government of the Living*, Foucault had entirely reconstructed his analytical schema to reflect the complexity of the subject’s implication in the manifestation of the truth; the ‘government by the truth’ replaces the schema of power-knowledge (Senellart, 2012, pp.341-342). The ‘government by the truth’ was a shift towards a concern with subjectivity, or rather, towards the complex entwining of the relation between truth and subjectivity, between the ‘constitution of an alethurgy that revolves round the autos, the myself, the himself, the I’, in the history of truth (Foucault 1979-80, p.49). Such a shift consists in the foregrounding of the subject, or subjectivity, in his attempt to comprehend the shift away from disciplinary societies and the necessity of theorising the assent of the subject to the non-coercive forms of power-knowledge that produces them. He remarked that the theme of *alethurgy*, of reflexive truth acts, was, ‘throughout ancient culture and continuously at least since the Greek fifth century, thought to be absolutely indispensable for the realization of power in its

93 Before 1980, in contrast, Foucault was clear about the fact that truth is linked ‘by a circular relation to systems of power which produce it and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which redirect it’ (2001 [1976], p.114).
just and legitimate essence’ since there could be no just and legitimate power if individuals do not tell the truth about themselves, which is also required if power is ‘actually to be established according to laws that are those of the sun, of the sun that organizes the world and the sun that lights up the depths of conscience’ (pp.88-89). Frédéric Gros (2012, p.344) notes that what Foucault calls ‘alethurgy’ in fact ‘presupposes a principle of irreducibility to any epistemology’, and thus, perhaps gestures to a moment of freedom. In this way, the exercise of power demands ‘not only acts of obedience and submission, but truth acts in which individuals who are subjects in the power relationship are also subjects as actors, spectator witnesses, or objects in manifestation of truth procedures’. The ‘truth’ obliges subjects, given that it is the ‘truth.’ The subject deems something to be true and so submits to it: ‘[i]t is true, and I submit to it. I submit to it, since it is true, and I submit inasmuch as it is true’ (Foucault, 2012, p.96). This was not coercive; there could only be a ‘coercion of the non-true or the coercion and constraint of the unverifiable’ (Foucault 1979-80, p.95).

A truth that is ‘ethopoetic’ is ‘a truth such as is read in the weft of accomplished actions and physical postures, rather than as deciphered in the secrets of conscience or worked out in the chambers of professional philosophers (Gros, 2001, pp.528-529). The truth is not always displayed as a discursive claim; it is a reason for living: a logos actualized in existence, which sustains, intensifies, and tests it; which verifies it. And ‘the point is not to discover the truth of oneself, but of knowing with what true principles one is equipped, to what extent one is in a position to have them available when necessary’ and to ‘gauge how far you have got in your appropriation of truth as principle of conduct’ (cited in Gros, 2001, p.528). To this end, Foucault advocated personal writing and reflection as a means to ethopoiesis, whereby true discourse is transformed into an active principle.94

The reflexive ‘truth’ act could be thought to be initiated, in gaming, by something like the question: ‘what did I do wrong there in order to get a ‘game over’, or fail to achieve the intended outcome?’ It is a process in which we admit to ourselves our errors in relation to our view of the order of the cosmos (or the game world), and it is a truth act in which the subject is the actor of the alethurgy, ‘since it is he who by his discourse reveals and brings into the light something that was in shadow and darkness’

94 Such a seemingly positive characterisation of truth and its displacement of the objectivisation of the subject was not of course without its ambivalence. Yet ‘truth’ did not have the negative connotations associated with the forms of individualisation imposed by the state, and from which Foucault had exhorted us to break free.
(Foucault 1979-80, p.82). In this way, the gamer’s own self-evidence and hypothesising is the best and strongest proof and demonstration that something is true (ibid., p.96).\textsuperscript{95} It is the truth of how we orientate ourselves through the game based on our own reasoning, testing, and the activity of the analytical learning cycle. It is not, however, a means by which we can access the ‘objective’ impersonal truth of the algorithms themselves, which arguably occupy an inaccessible noumenal realm.

Computer games, as complex systems that are intuitively experienced and also analytically dissected, lend themselves to the process of players adopting an ethopoetic truth. This ethopoetic truth is not strictly comparable to a procedural enthymeme, in which ‘the player literally fills in the missing portion of the syllogism by interacting with the application, [though] that action is constrained by the rules’ (Bogost, 2007, p.33). Although the crux of the enthymeme is that the user feels as if they have ‘gotten there’ themselves, the missing portion is a standardised one, and in this sense the feeling of one’s participation is arguably less justified when any other person could have filled in that missing portion in an identical manner. An ethopoetic truth is, in contrast, much more personal, though it is also based on the discovery of ‘true principles.’ For this to be so, the system itself must be of a sufficient complexity to make this possible. For example, the way in which two players employ different strategies or playstyles to complete a game leads to their encountering very different problematics. The AI opponents that they face, in *Tekken 6*, for example, will react differently – exhibiting different strengths and weaknesses – to the players’ different strategies, and it may be the case that if these AI opponents have certain exploitable weaknesses, this is only accessible for one kind of player strategy. In this way, some players find particular matchups or sections of a game more difficult than others. Similarly, if players may tackle various missions in an open game world in different orders, and if the missions scale with the player’s level, then the level of difficulty will likely be dependent upon the player’s build and also the stage at which they have chosen to tackle that mission, independently of the amount of competence or skill they have at their disposal. The various ways in which players encounter different problematics in the course of navigating the game as a labyrinth is in addition to, in time-critical games, the conjunction between their bodily *habitus* and the rhythms of the game, as discussed

\textsuperscript{95}Given that Foucault does not posit anything to be ‘true’ in itself, this movement to the ‘truth’ has an intentionally circular quality in which what is true for an individual repeatedly affirms itself through their subsequent practices, which are also aimed at the ‘truth’.

95
earlier, and which affords even greater opportunities for the truth to be specific to the weft of accomplished actions. This is the ‘truth’ of their encounter with the non-discursive bodily ‘feel’ of the ‘time-critical’ game, and the more that games increase in the complexity of their rules and laws, the more idiosyncratic this dynamic may become. There is a circular process of self-constitution, of the player practices following the player’s identification with a process or series of processes that exists in the game amongst other possible process. The process or processes have a gravity of its own, and induce the player to continue with them, eventually culminating in a certain disposition or orientation towards the game that could be described as a *bexis* or *habitus*. The traces of this disposition, which is presupposed in a formative manner, and then inculcated, are sedimented for future play. Insofar as computer game structures are isomorphic with contemporary power structures, in terms of inviting an impetus from us, the nature of this disposition may also have implications for the subject’s disposition towards the wider social world.

Thus, what has been called the ‘magic cycle’ is given an ideal realisation by the cybernetic nature of computer games. The way in which we progressively grasp the rules and laws is driven at a pace determined by our own volition, and marks what can be called an assent to the ‘truth’ as we experience it, given that the way in which the rules are revealed depends on us. What we then do with this information is often linked to an analytical rationality with which we are familiar – being able to optimise, to bring out the strengths of a strategy, and even to ‘theorycraft’, although we are not compelled to not deviate from this. How we uncover the game’s regularities and then utilise them in our play can also be intuitive, and unconscious of the game’s textual prompts; it is about how we sense and find our own way through a game, or even discover a ‘truth’ in the experience of gaming. This impetus that comes from us is nevertheless steered towards certain directions. It is channelled by the conditions under which the voluntary practices of the self take place, which are not about which actions and relations are absolutely prohibited, but which are subtly made easier or more difficult. The analysis with regard to the ‘rationalities’ within a game will be addressed in the next chapter, and will be the means for us to engage with the power-knowledge-subject tripartite involved; the player as subject and the game as power structure. This will assist us in gaining a grid of intelligibility with which to analyse the ‘tendency’ at work, the direction of subjectification or uniformities in the conditions under which the practices of the self take place. In this way, the complexity of the system lends itself to being considered not
in terms of disciplinary approaches, but in terms of the practices of the self and the problematics faced by the late Foucault as he turned towards the subject.
Chapter three

Computer game ‘rationalities’ and the orthogonal analysis

How is it possible to make generalising claims about games and subjectification when they are played in different ways by different players and can therefore be thought to instigate a diverse range of practices of the self? We cannot be so tentative as to refrain from saying anything at all only because they open themselves up to unpredictable forms of engagement, since it would deny us from a rich speculative enquiry into what is likely and unlikely to be the case in the conjunction between us and any computer game. There is often a great deal that can be deemed foreseeable, yet computer games cannot usually be said to bring about determinate consequences without a great deal of caveats and qualification. I have proposed that the ambivalence of computer games originates from their formal, procedural structure, and the way in which they invite an impetus from us to begin a process of feedback loops with the computer that can be comprehended as a practice that bears on how the player goes about the process of self-construction. As such, as I have proposed in the introduction, it is more productive to see computer games as instantiating practices and general principles for practices, or as ‘an ethic’ (Galloway, 2012, p.22) rather than as an ‘ontology’, where this is understood to ossify their executability. This chapter will sharpen what it means for a computer game to inculcate certain practices, as opposed to a singular practice, and for whom this can be said to be true. This will then lead to a consideration of computer games’ ‘rationalities’. What is outlined is, therefore, a method of narrowing down the ambivalence at the heart of their formal structure so that what is made easier or more difficult can eventually be considered in terms of the implicit ethical standard that has been explored in the previous chapters. We can then begin to assess whether the practices entailed foment a wandering away from, or reinforcement of the self that is imposed by individualising technologies. It is a means of articulating computer games as structures of power without falling into reductively structural approaches, and which duly recognises the ergodic, noematic nature of games.

See: (Williams et al., 2006; Garfield, 2000).
To do this, I turn to Foucault’s tripartite analysis of power-knowledge-subject, of which the analysis of power as a pole orthogonal to that of the subject will be prioritised. Given the conjunction between power and the subject, I favour not a detached analysis in terms of the precise remit of what is possible and what is not in the game, or of what exactly is needed to properly ‘unlock’ the game, on the basis of the ontologically rigid ‘materiality’ of the game, but analyses in terms of the conjunction between power and the subject, or rather the interactions between the structures of the game and the player’s disposition, to result in certain player practices. This means that the ‘rationality’ of the game resulting from this analysis cannot be entirely disentangled from the player dispositions that also need to be posited in order to initiate the analysis itself.

The conditions under which the practices of the self take place

The practices of the self denote that it is the self or individual who practices them, although we have touched on the ways in which they are tied into, and rely upon, others. In any case, although Foucault has at times indicated that they are divorced from power relations, there must also be a recognition that the self is not divorced from the world, that there are limits on what can be achieved through our own efforts, even with the assistance of others. We cannot, for example, really be a knight in the modern world, since, as Kirkpatrick (2008) argues, without the structures of feudalism, we can only at most become a Don Quixote. In this regard, the practices necessarily bear some relation to the contemporary structure of being insofar as they must exist within the realm of what is thinkable or possible, even if they may ultimately lead one to attempt to transgress those bounds. That is to say, in order for people to freely choose between different kinds of behaviour, there must be a lack of constraints attached to those behaviours; McNay (1992, p.74; p.82) mentions the absence of social stigma as relevant to differentiating between those practices that are ‘merely suggested’ from those that are ‘imposed’. Socio-cultural determinants may impose some practices more than others.

97 The degree of liberty that the Greeks enjoyed, and which Foucault celebrated as a foil to Christian asceticism, existed as a collective idea that was supported and embedded in a network of social and political arrangements and obligations.

98 McNay (1992, p.71), for example, comments that ‘it is harder to stylize freely one’s identity in the realm of sexuality – given the taboos and injunctions that operate around
This point is closely tied in with the common complaint that Foucault paid too little heed to the role of power in his late work, particularly the role of social and political institutions. As we will see, this ‘oversight’ is more indicative of his attempt to grapple with the inherent antagonism between the analyses of power and of the subject in a way that he had not before, in his elaboration of the ‘orthogonal analyses’ of power and knowledge that always bear on the issue of what is possible for the self without determining it, than it is of an outright omission.

Foucault’s approach to any question in his late work contained three moments, each representing a particular phase that his work has gone through. As O’Leary (2009, p.80) explains, in a field such as sexuality, ‘firstly he (Foucault) will consider the forms of knowledge (savoir) and discourse which are generated around sexual behaviour (roughly corresponding to his work in the 1960s); secondly, he will consider the forms of power that take hold of our behaviour (roughly corresponding to his work in the 1970s); and thirdly, a moment that is added only in the early 1980s, he will consider the modes of relation to self which our sexuality promotes and builds on’. In effect, this power-knowledge-self tripartite, or these three domains of experience, ‘can only be understood one in relation to the others and cannot be understood one without the others; ‘the individual-subject only ever emerges at the intersection of a technique of domination and a technique of the self’, or at ‘the fold of processes of subjectivation over procedures of subjection’ (Gros, 2005, p.526). ‘No dimension can be consecrated as fundamental. Political violence of moral postures will never disappear in a general logic; the demands of knowledge or ethical constructions will never be reduced to forms of domination; and finally, it will never be possible to found forms of veridiction and modes of government on subjective structures’ (Foucault, 2011, p.346).

For our purposes of applying this mode of analysis to the practices of the self in computer games, it should be noted that there are questions pertaining to how such an masculinity and femininity – than it is to stylize one’s existence as a political citizen’. Some of the broader questions raised are as follows: how can the individual’s right to genuine practices of the self and self-transformation be better assisted within a certain kind of social environment? And what are the means by which this kind of environment can be brought about? How can the radical lessons learned from an aesthetics of the self be turned into a politics that transforms the social realm so that others can also more easily undertake an aesthetics of the self?

99 John Simons (1995), for example, has lamented what he saw as the separation of ethics from the axis of political power in Foucault’s analysis of the Hellenistic arts of the self.

100 Elsewhere, these have been given as: the discourse of truth (alētheia), the government of men (politeia), and the ethical elaboration of the subject (ēthos) (Foucault, 2011).
Orthogonal analysis is to be applied, as well as its coherence: ‘[h]ow distinct and irreducible is the subject pole? Do all three have equal explanatory or even descriptive power?’ (Flynn, 1985, p.539). At times, Foucault has indicated that the axis of the self is irreducible, trenchantly emphasising the self-constitution of the subject: the ethic of the self is one that ‘defines the relation of power exercised over the self independently of any statutory correlation and any exercise of power over others. It isolates it from the field of other power relations’ (Gros, 2001, p.540). Yet at other times, he emphasises their entanglement with the other two axes, stating, for example, that the practices of the self ‘are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group’ (Foucault, 1988, p.11). What is clear is that the dimension of the self should not be taken as fundamental, but nor should it be taken as secondary to the analysis of power. Thus, the way in which we apply this mode of analysis and navigate its tensions cannot be defined in advance, and consequently calls for a great deal of self-reflexivity. A prominent fault line is between the weighting we give to an overarching ‘ontologized account of power,’ on the one hand, and ‘the historical ontology of ourselves’ that ‘seeks to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take’ (Foucault, 1984, p.46), on the other. However, it is not that a comparatively

101 On the analysis of this quasi-Sartrean turn, and on the definition of ‘subjectivation’ as the reflective constitution of the self through thought, see Han (2002, p.192).

102 Lewandowski (1995, p.221) has argued that Foucault’s analysis of the entwining of power with the modern human subject is Janus-faced insofar as with one face, Foucault sees power as a non-subject centred system that produces or objectifies individuals, whilst with another face, Foucault sees the possibilities of individual subjects’ capacities for self-construction or transformation along lines that resist networks of power or truth regimes. He further remarks (ibid., p.241) that Foucault never succeeded in balancing the tension between the ‘ontologized account of power’ and ‘the historical ontology of ourselves’. Similarly, Dews (2007, p.285) thinks that Foucault was never able to hold the three concerns of the tripartite analysis in focus simultaneously, but tended to ‘organize the whole field of his theoretical activity in terms of his current preoccupation’ (that of the subject, in the late period), whilst McCarthy (1991, p.74) and O’Leary (2002, p.61) have both also argued that Foucault’s emphasis lay with the axis of the relations to self in his late work. Han (2002, p.154) has commented that it is difficult to unite the third axis with the first two since it ‘does not refer to objective conditions, but introduces the reflective dimension of subjectivity’. However, none of this should be particularly surprising given that ‘transfiguration,’ as we have seen, requires the interplay between the truth of what is real, which has resonances with our understanding of power's operation, and the exercise of freedom, which seems to designate the capacity of the subject to resist power and transform themselves in ways not prescribed by power.
greater emphasis on the pole of the self better aids self-transformation since the critical ontology of ourselves requires us to engage in the difficult interplay between what is true, and the exercise of freedom, which cannot feature elevating one component over the other. Further, it is worth noting that there have been certain inconsistencies or ambiguities in Foucault’s articulation of the systematicity of power, which further opens up the interplay. In particular, power has been expressed as either global relations that offer a grid of intelligibility, or as local forces that defy the necessities of a comprehensive totality. I propose here that we consider the analysis of computer games with a speculative mindset, one that searches for wide-ranging connections that run deeper than what is local and fragmentary. Although ex-post facto type analyses that strive to pack all phenomena into the spaces allotted for them by a monolithic accounts of power certainly ought to be avoided, the engagement with the present required by the critical ontology of ourselves requires us to ask, and to search for, how micro-reactions concatenate in a systematic fashion outside of the subjective awareness of the individual subjects in question, in accordance with their immanent realised of wider patterns and rationalities.

103 Charles Taylor (1985) has pointed out the ambiguities in Foucault's thinking about the relations of micro- to macro-contexts of power. On the one hand, he seems to say that we cannot hope to explain the local forces in terms of some global relations. Foucault’s target is plainly Marxism: there is a reciprocal conditional between global and micro-contexts in a way that global class struggles that attempt to explain conflicts in the micro-contexts of family, for example, fail to capture. Foucault has remarked that ‘there is no first and fundamental principle of Power which dominates society down to the least detail’ (cited in Hoy, 1986b, p.142), and that ‘[t]here are too many diverse kinds of relations, too many lines of analysis…A plethora of intelligibilities, a deficit of necessities’ (Foucault, 1991, p.78). In this sense, ‘neither comprehending the world nor changing it depends on grasping (in either the theoretical or the practical sense) the totality, since the concept of totality is not applicable to his understanding of power as an open-ended network or grid’ (Hoy, 1986b, p.142); the operation of power is on the level of ongoing subjugation, at the level of continuous and uninterrupted processes. On the other hand, Foucault has strong claims to systematicity at times. There can be found references to ‘strategies’ in Power/Knowledge, for example, which points to the strategic logic of the context itself that cannot be attributed to anyone as their conscious purpose. This amounts to the thesis that there is a continuing struggle that permeates the whole context in which we are all caught up; micro-reactions concatenate in a systematic fashion that can be inferred by the historian.
The bridging between player-centrism and game-centrism

Some of the debates in the field of game studies have echoed the above discussion of the interplay between power and the subject in the form of the relation between the game and the player. In the next section, I refer to Espen Aarseth’s (2007) and Miguel Sicart’s (2011) engagements with the power/subject tension, particularly with the questions with which we are left once we have discarded a disciplinary view of the constitution of subjectivities: how can we best articulate the potentialities within a game, that some exert a greater force than others, whilst at the same time recognising the role played by the agency of players?

For Aarseth (2007), in his short essay, ‘Transgressive Play and the Implied Player’, it is the distinctive ontology of the game that calls for a bridging between the player-centric and game-centric disciplinary divisions that have dominated game studies. If we consider computer games as analogous to structures of power insofar as they undoubtedly designate the field of possible actions that an individual is able to take within them, as well as making some easier to accomplish than others, and the player as a subject acting within such a structure, then the bridging would be parallel to that which has been discussed between an ontology of power and an ontology of the subject. On this reading, what Aarseth refers to as the distinctive ontology of the

104 The division between game and player as corresponding to that between the axes of power and that of the self is incomplete insofar as it raises the question as to whether players’ motivations originated from themselves or a wider social context that exhibits its own regularities. This refers to the axis of ‘knowledge,’ which in this context may be most appropriately encompassed by the conventions and cultures of gameplay as they are informed by, and also inform, players and the kinds of games that exist. We might include, in this axis, analyses of a variety of dimensions that affect how the player plays the game itself, which cannot be easily attributed to the player nor to the game. For example, ‘overgames’, which are mutually agreed extra-videogame rules coined by their players (Karhulahti, 2015b), rather than what Juul (2003) calls ‘negotiable consequences’, which pertain to the extra-gamically agreed upon consequences of victory or defeat. In some situations, the overgames can seem to take over the rules of the computer game, which becomes only the environment or context for a fiercely competitive or complex overgame taking place between friends; players might intentionally lose matches in the computer game if they deem there to have been some violation of the rules of the overgame or foul play (Karhulahti, 2016). In a similar vein, Douglas Wilson (2012, pp.98-99) has explored the ‘metachallenge’ of a game, which can be something as fluid and loosely defined as being ‘a good sport and a fun companion’. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a detailed examination of the axis of knowledge, or the discourses that apply to gameplay and affect how games are played. However, it will not be possible to refrain entirely from referring to it, though it is arguable that it has a
A computer game echoes the line that has been advanced in this thesis, which is that the way in which computer games are involved in the instigation of practices of the self, rather than bringing about disciplinary determinism or freeform play, imbues them with the ambivalence that makes them particularly emblematic of the contemporary imbrication between power and subjectivity; it is only when the subject with the appropriate disposition is present that the game is realised in a manifestation that makes the choices seem like our own. The analysis of power is inseparable from an ethics of the subject defined by the relation to self, which we will attempt to infer from an analysis of the actions implied by the structures of the game.

Aarseth had been explicitly motivated to turn to the concept of the ‘implied player’ for two main reasons, which are themselves revealing about not only a certain conception of game studies, but also about wider interdisciplinary debates that bear upon the epistemological foundations which decide on the object of study and the means of gaining knowledge about it. These reasons are connected with, and arguably draw upon, various possible definitions of the ‘implied player’ – the method by which the ‘implied’ or ‘generic’ is constructed. These are distinctions that must be clearly made if the objective is for a single consistent concept of the ‘implied player’ to perform the functions required by the two reasons; different functions call for the deployment of different concepts. Aarseth’s interesting essay is indicative of a number of points. The need for a bridging between player-centric and game-centric is a critique of both a focus on individual response shorn from being situated in broader analyses of the wider conditions, and also of viewing games as blunt deterministic structures.

His first reason starts with him asking what the ‘object’ of game studies might be. The struggle between the humanities and social sciences over the control of the idea of the player, as he puts it, is that between the player as a ‘function’ of the game, and the player as a real embodied individual. Aarseth thought that there was the possibility, or at least the demand, of bridging the two; he postulated that since ‘games are both aesthetic and social phenomena, a theory of the player must combine both social and aesthetic perspectives to be successful’ (Aarseth, 2007, p.130). The challenge issued by this statement is contained within the idea that it can be a theory (the singular); is it possible for a concept of the ‘implied player’ to bring about this bridging? With his second reason, Aarseth was concerned that game studies researchers who studied players were comparatively weaker role to play in solipsistic single-player games as compared to multi-player ones.
insufficiently focusing on what ‘typical’ players did, as opposed to ‘subversive’ players who played the game in unpredictable ways. On this understanding, the proposed concept of the ‘implied player’ must also be better able to represent how most players actually play a particular game.

I note here that what is required in the bridging is not the complete effacement of the game-player distinction. It is instead an understanding of their complex conjunction in terms of Foucault’s insistence on an orthogonal analysis. Although the polarisation into game and player is blunt and fails to acknowledge the complex interaction between the two, it would also be odd in some ways to try to collapse this distinction entirely. The implied player is the implied player of a work. ¹⁰⁵ Foucault (1988, cited in O’Leary, 2009, pp.333-334) reminds us, of his own writings, that ‘the effects of the book might land in unexpected places and form shapes that I had never thought of’. ¹⁰⁶ If, in thinking how desubjectification can be made possible, we can conceive of texts or works that might enable an individual to ‘stray afield of himself’, to be able to lose or break free of a previous version of himself that had been engrained with habit and familiarity, then it seems fitting that we may ask what it is about such texts that enable them to effect this.

The critical ontology of ourselves can be understood to call for the rigorous evaluation of particular games, as part of the present that we inhabit, with a view to obtaining a broader perspective in order for us to understand how they produce various relations of the self in us through the way in which they intersect with our existing dispositions. It may be unclear where the boundaries are between what is facilitated by the game and the ways in which we actively bring presumptions and dispositions into the game. This is the point at which the object, which is emblematic of the contemporary period, intersects with our own self-formation. A project of evaluating the qualities and propensities of artefacts that mediate our relation to self is one that is affixed to certain goals. These may be to try to classify those artefacts that fall foul of such an evaluation as things to be shunned and avoided – to pass definitive judgment

¹⁰⁵ As Eco (1983, p.7) has noted, ‘the text is there, and produces its own effects’.
¹⁰⁶ Foucault’s attitude, in the 1960s, towards the transformative power of literature arguably leans more towards the capacity of the materials themselves to transform us than towards what we bring to them (see: O’Leary, 2009, p.41). But his commitment to the transgressive contestation effected by literature was later revoked as no more than a ‘swan song’ (Foucault, 2000, p.127). In this way, there is a difficulty in the attempt to find something in Foucault’s work that offers the basis on which the capacity of the materials themselves, independent of the attitude of the subject, can be evaluated.
on them. Alternatively, they may be for us to re-orient our relations to them through understanding that there can be a tendency for them to bring out particular modes of relation to ourselves, but that these do not invariably have to obtain, and that their obtaining or not depends on the input of a certain attitudinal approach from us of which we may not entirely be conscious. The exercise involved in a critical ontology of ourselves as players then, is as much to map out the propensities of the games themselves, as it is to make us conscious of the attitudes that we are disposed to bring, given that these elements exist in a mutually influential relationship. It does not have to rule out the exercise of distinguishing between our own attitudes and the propensities of the object, although overly rigid distinction may result in the kind of definitive judgments being passed on certain artefacts as mentioned above. It is not necessarily to go so far as to state that there are irreducible formal and material qualities to the object that manifestly limit and compel the ways in which it might be used, yet it is resolved to thinking that in the configuration between a subject and object, we may be inclined to believe that some responses are due more to one or the other, even though they are not solely the consequence of one or the other.  

**Aarseth’s first reason**

I return now to Aarseth’s first reason. Game Studies’ own cross-disciplinary pedigree underpins the source of the (disciplinary) lines of conflict, which are disputes concerning what actually constitutes the most appropriate object of study in terms of the player. As Aarseth puts it, this has often been framed as the open warfare between the ‘critical player-theorist’ and the ‘ethnographic player-observer’ (Aarseth, 2007, p.131). For the former, the object is the game as an expressive, aesthetic object, with a substitutable player existing as a function of the game, as ‘a slot in a game machine that can be filled by any rational, critical informed person – a model reader, in Umberto Eco’s terms’ (ibid.) in order to realise its expectations. The researcher’s own playing experience is drawn upon as a source of theoretical insights (ibid.). This would be,  

107 It may be, for example, that the object can be thought to exhibit nascent qualities that only come out in a particular context or when catalysed in the right way, whilst others emerge in a much broader range of situations. Given that the latter can seem immune to the flux of history, this may imbue it with the appearance of being a quality of the work alone, though framing it as such can elide the subtle differences between a broader range of situations.
essentially, regarding what is required in order for the game to achieve its effects. For the latter, the focus is upon ‘other players, their habits, actions, values and relationships. This researcher is careful to extract or neutralize her own experience, to the extent that it is possible. Self-play here is potentially suspect, since it is ‘subjective and quite likely unrepresentative’ (ibid.); the object is the player as ‘an actual, historical person, or better, persons’ (ibid.).

The division is one that has been widely drawn, albeit with small degrees of variation. Björk and Juul (2012), for example, argue that confusion often arises between the conflation of games as potential activities consisting of interactions between designs and player actions, on the one hand, and games as entities that only come into being when used by players:

The difference can be simply explained by distinguishing between potentiality and actuality: a tower of blocks may potentially fall if pushed, and pushing it will cause it to actually fall. A game is something that can be potentially played; sometimes players will actually play them; sometimes players will exhaust them by analysis...everyday language already handles this issue quite well...Players apparently have no problem distinguishing between StarCraft 2 as a designed artefact, and Starcraft 2 as it plays out in a concrete game instance.

In other words, the ‘static game rules and/or game equipment’, which are submitted to formal analyses, are distinguished from ‘actual instances of play’ (Smith, 2006, p.22); ‘there is a difference between game studies and the uses of games’ (Eskelinen, 2012, p.320), or between those who offer critiques of the games themselves or those who study the players (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006), between the games themselves or the players who play them (Juul, 2011). Many commentators fall into either one camp or the other. Ermi and Mäyrä (2005) have stated that if we want to understand what a game is, we need to understand what happens in the act of playing, and we need to understand the player and the experience of gameplay. Computer games ‘are governed not only by their rule systems, but also by implicit and shared cultural expectations as well as the

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108 ‘Self-play’ refers to the critical player-theorist deriving conclusions based on their own experiences. Aarseth (2007, p.131) believes that in addition to the tension between the ‘critical player-theorist’ and the ‘ethnographic player-observer’, there is another tension at work: ‘the methodological divide between formal and informal methods’, which manifests, in the social sciences, between quantitative and qualitative, and in the humanities, between structuralism/theory and close reading.
material conditions under which they are undertaken’, writes Malaby (2007, p.20); and its ‘coded and formal rules are rarely sufficient when it comes to restricting the situated, meaning-making contextual negotiations of play’, avers Carter, Gibbs, and Arnold (2015, Introduction, para.2). On the other hand, Juul (2011) believes that given the generally unalterable nature of the algorithmic structure of digital games, the rules of a game accrue more importance in relation to the rules of non-mechanistically implemented rules that can be negotiated by the players themselves such that those who supposedly only study the players miss something very crucial. Eskelinen (2012, p.325) has been one of the staunchest defenders of this approach, stating that what he sees as ‘refusing to take game rules seriously’ and ‘focusing only on real players’, can only offer us ‘games as metaphors to spike an open-ended discussion of their unpredictable meanings’. Formal analyses of the rules is a necessary anchor for the immediate context of play or we would have ‘free floating studies of play leading nowhere except to mutually incompatible case studies, contexts and definitions…and studies of player behaviour within traditional paradigms of social sciences incapable of separating games from other human activities’ (Eskelinen, 2012, p.326).

The acknowledgement that there are irreconcilably different objects of study at stake, if accepted, would seem to result in a certain accompanying demand for scholarly and conceptual precision that seems to call for a demarcation along traditionally disciplinary boundaries. This would avoid unnecessary battles for supremacy between fundamentally different lenses or methods. It is not, however, entirely clear that it is Aarseth’s intention to accomplish this clear division. Since games have the ontological status of being, he thinks, both aesthetic and social phenomena, ‘a theory of the player must combine both social and aesthetic perspectives to be successful’ (Aarseth, 2007, p.130, emphasis added). That is to say, given this premise of what games are, and given that we are attempting to understand them without dogmatic recourse to inadequate existing frames and arbitrary disciplinary boundaries, it would seem particularly reductive and inappropriate to make this division between games and players as distinct objects of study insofar as one cannot be sensitively analysed without invoking the other. Further, it is the concept of the ‘implied player’, as addressed in the article, that is the candidate to accomplish this bridging. Understood in this way, it is a claim that stems from the ontological status of games rather than one that attempts to attack the boundaries of existing disciplines as misplaced in general.
Juul (2011, cited in Behrenhausen, 2012, p.6) has complained of the asymmetry in which there is so much writing in game studies that reacts against the discussion of rules yet nearly no writing that reacts against the discussion of players. If there is a position that does the latter, it is perhaps ‘proceduralism’, at least according to Miguel Sicart (2011). It is informative to turn here to Sicart’s arguments in favour of a player-centred approach, but which turns out to be nothing quite so one-sided. What is most central for proceduralism is how arguments are embedded into the rules of the game and how they are expressed to and received by the players: players are persuaded by the procedural argument, which is a form that has become much more widespread in the wake of the proliferation of computer games. Sicart believes that proceduralism’s preoccupation is reductively formalist. Insofar as the proceduralists argue that the ‘meaning’ (there is some ambivalence over his exact use of this term) of the game is only to be found in the formal properties of the rules, and what players do is fulfil the function stipulated for them by the rules, ‘[p]roceduralism often disregards the importance of play and players as activities that have creative, performative properties’ (ibid., para.17) since play has been effectively subordinated to or subsumed by the rules of the game. This argument is based on an understanding of play (or player behaviours) as containing an irreducible excess beyond that of the determinist or totalitarian approach to play that is the prerogative of proceduralism. As he makes clear, proceduralists believe that ‘behaviours can be predicted, even contained, by the rules, and therefore the meaning of the game, and of play, evolves from the way the game has been created and not how it is played; not to mention when and where it is played, and by whom’ (Sicart, 2011). Proceduralism fails to take into account ‘the player as a living, breathing, culturally embodies, ethically and politically engaged being that plays not only for an ulterior purpose, but for play’s sake’ (Sicart, 2011, Against Procedurality section, para.4). It is the player ‘who plays for the myth, and not for reason; for the other players, and not for the game; for the game, but not for the message’ (ibid.).

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109 Sicart (2011, The Proceduralists section, para.1-2) identifies ‘proceduralism’ with the formalist orientation of the ludological approach, and believes it to have originated from accounts of how games could convey political messages, especially in the works of Lev Manovich (2001) and Janet Murray (1997), and then further popularised by Ian Bogost’s first two books (2006; 2007). ‘What proceduralism (and ludology) argued’, Sicart says, ‘was that computer games present a technological and cultural exception that deserves to be analysed through the ontological particularities that make computer games unique, in this case, the fact that they have a ‘procedural nature’’ (The Proceduralists section, para.3).
In light of the fact that proceduralism has been argued to lead to a way of researching games that deprives them of the richness that players might bring to the game, Sicart’s aim is ‘to engage in a productive conversation with proceduralism, bringing back players and advocating, finally, for a player-centric approach to the design of games’ (Sicart, 2011, Introduction section, para.6). It is not, however, a player-centrism that overlooks the materiality of the game. When he states that what should be argued is for play to be understood as ‘an expression of appropriation, and for games as slow technologies’ (Sicart, 2011, Understanding Instrumental Play section, para.33), he seems to imply that appropriation is when the player asserts their agency within the context of the possibilities offered by the game; there is no determination of action or meaning, but there is no omission of the constraints upon the player. Games structure play, and facilitate it by means of rules, but the rules do not determine play.

Sicart believes that used as a theoretical framework, proceduralism has the potential to lead designers to de-emphasise the role of spontaneous and unpredictable play on the part of the players as a source of their enjoyment of the game, and to thereby design games that do not leave gaps for such spontaneity to occur. It is in this sense that he worries that the proceduralists are ‘designing against play’, which is basically understood as the unknown and the uncontrollable. ‘The risk of proceduralist rhetoric’, he says, ‘is to identify play with reason, to control play and guide it to a predetermined purpose’ (Sicart, 2011, Against procedurality section, para.12). This, however, is a worry that the games made on proceduralist design principles will be bad, not an attack on the claim that games do preclude players from making their own meanings, and that player behaviours are predictable. Nelson (2012, Heavy-handed symbolism: para. 5) points out that there are times when Sicart seems to be arguing that ‘proceduralism erroneously claims that game rules encode more meaning than they really do’, yet given that he is concerned about games ‘instrumentalizing the player to convey didactic, moralising messages’, he seems to be committed to the view that ‘some games really do foreclose any real role for the player in meaning-creation’. In that case, his position ‘is better phrased as a disagreement with certain uses of rhetorics, rather than as a critique of the concept of procedural rhetoric’ (ibid.).

Jason Hawreliak (2012, para.4) does not agree with Sicart’s reading that Bogost disregarded the importance of players and suggested that meaning lies only in the rules. Rather, ‘Bogost simply describes the rather mundane fact that computers are good at representing processes, since they themselves are a series of processes’. 

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In any case, Sicart’s final position in the piece is an astute one: ‘[m]y intention, my position against procedurality’, he says, ‘is that of a demand: for each procedural analysis there must be an orthogonal analysis of play that completes the arguments of meaning by means of accounting the play experience. Or, in other words, we need a theory of play that accounts for, and complements, the proceduralist discourse’ (Sicart, 2011, Against Procedurality section, para.7, emphasis added). Not only are there clear resonances with Aarseth’s call for a bridging, this position accords with Foucault’s thought that there must always be an ‘orthogonal’ analysis, to the one being adopted, even using the same term. It is less exact on how this is to be accomplished, how the study of players is to be reconciled with procedural analyses, but this need not necessarily be deemed an unfortunate omission. Sicart has made inroads into a problematic that has not yet come into clear focus in the area of game studies.

These calls for orthogonal analyses effectively amount to the claim that computer games face a set of obstacles to being formally analysed that literary texts do not, which chimes with what Aarseth meant by stating that the bridging between existing disciplinary approaches was necessitated by their distinctive ontology. Unlike literary works, which can of course feature different layers of reading and ‘traps’ within the text (Doležel, 1980), the ‘model reader’ or ‘ideal reader’ is able to act as a lodestone that brings together a set of readings so that the more plausible ones defeat the less plausible, and those with equal claim exist in balanced tension with one another. Yet there are difficulties facing computer games, particularly those with non-linear and emergent qualities, being easily encompassed under the mode of a singular implied player in this way. Intuitively, a single player embodies a single trajectory through the game, or at least a single style of play, whereas the concept that is needed for our purposes of elucidating the ‘rationalities’ or tendencies within games cannot necessarily be encapsulated by such a singular concept. What is needed is an understanding of how the ‘rationality’ of the game inflects some or all of the forms of self-constitution that take place, and the way in which it does so. This issue will be explored more fully later in this chapter.

For now, I would like to register a practical difficulty that concerns would-be procedural analyses. Game-centric positions that draw from the interpreter’s own playing experience often rely on a conception of the game as a set of potentials, and thus on making the case for an analysis of the game that is sufficiently dispassionate and true of anyone who might potentially play the game to warrant the reader’s attention
over that of a personal, auto-ethnographic account. Although it may seem unproblematic to draw the division that game-centric positions consider the game as a series of potentials of which some may be more likely to be manifested by players than others, whilst player-centric positions understand the object as it is used or realised by specific players or player groups, the assessment of potentiality is often in practice made in light of one’s observations of actual play, considered together with one’s own play and an array of other factors, such as the ludic literacy of the other players in question.

It is difficult to do the kind of analysis that attempts to objectively list the features of various computer games given that a plethora of complex, relational rules, which can imbue the game with emergent properties, is often hidden from knowledge (see: Juul, 2011, p.88). In addition, a game as a designed artefact features a range of potentialities that may not be apparent to even its designers (see: Super Smash Bros. Melee (Hal Laboratory, 2001)). As such, potentiality is not adjudged purely on the basis of the interpreter’s own formal assessment of the game, or their own playing experience, without reference to those of others, lest it result in a rather impoverished account. Further, it is a stale exercise to try to map potentials without some context of the kinds of potentials that players are likely to realise, or the dispositions that they bring to the game. Thus, the apparently formal analyses of the critical player theorist implicitly draws upon an array of empirical information concerning others’ play, particularly to give context to one’s own play, and to situate it within a matrix of possible play responses that shapes the interpreter’s judgment of the game.

Aarseth’s second reason

Aarseth’s first reason sets up the second; he claims that there is a preponderance, within game studies, of those who study players, or rather, a specific type of player. Citing

111 Jakobsson (2007, p.391) has noted that the player-made Super Smash Bros. Melee (SSBM) compendium of knowledge ‘outweigh(s) the knowledge the designers had of the rules of the game’, from which he muses about the way in which we ought to conceive of rules coming into existence. Perhaps rules should be regarded as ‘an open-ended list of possibilities emerging in the actual playing of the games’ (ibid.). It is more accurate, however, to refer to these discoveries of advanced techniques, such as ‘wavedashing,’ ‘dash dancing,’ or ‘l-cancelling,’ as ‘laws’ rather than ‘rules’ (Gregersen, 2005).

112 This is due to the interpreter, in almost all cases, not being able to anticipate all the possibilities (see: Aarseth, 2003, pp.3-4).
Jonas Heide Smith’s (2006) studies into the game research literature, Aarseth proffers a diagnosis that ‘Game Studies harbors a dominant player model, the “active player”’; actively engaged with the game or gamespace in ways often not prescribed or predicted by the game designers’ (2007, p.131). The conclusion to be drawn from Smith’s findings, in which there is a preference for player behaviour that is ‘active, creative and subversive, and going against the designs of the game makers’ (Aarseth, 2007, p.131), might well be that the ‘active player perspective’, as it is known, is ‘naïve, celebratory, misguided and romantic’ (ibid). However, Aarseth’s argument does not attempt to detract away from the importance of transgressive play to the experience of games - he gives numerous examples of his own gaming experiences, where out of the ordinary occurrences form some of the most memorable gaming experiences. Nevertheless, he stresses how this should not obscure our identification of the subjection of the player to the rules and structure of the game.

Although Aarseth (2007, p.131) avers that ‘innovative, subversive and transgressive play’, despite being statistically unrepresentative, is nevertheless nothing less than a crucial aspect of, and perhaps ‘the key to understanding all kinds of play and game culture’, he is puzzled by the disproportionate emphasis accorded to such play: ‘[m]ost players simply follow the directions and play to win, so why put the focus on those few who don’t? Are game studies researchers really unaware of what typical players actually do, or are they bored by it, and look for more colourful examples to liven their writing?’ (ibid.). In other words, it is problematic for him that statistically representative play has been overlooked. This could be regarded as, on the one hand, a straightforward misrepresentation of most players, but on the other, also of the game insofar as the way in which it constrains or structures play and players is underestimated. In this way, the arguably skewed focus of ethnographic player-observer research has resulted in a celebration of the transgressive player, which in turn feeds back into and colours the critical player-theorist perspective: that games are inherently filled with the potential for players to subvert the intentions that formed them and the boundaries that were imposed on them by their designers – one just has to look at the (selective) examples.

Smith (2006, p.44) reminds those who point out that examples of transgressive play invalidate player models that assume they play in a way that rationally optimises the outcome: that registering that any model, such as the ‘Rational Player Model’, not fully determining behaviour ‘is some way from concluding that the observed behaviour is “totally inexplicable” from the perspective of the model’.
Consequently, there has been a covert celebration of the potentials within computer games insofar as they produce unforeseeable forms of ‘situated play’ (Jakobsson, 2007, p.392), and allow players to obtain ‘strikingly different experiences’ (Hughes, 1999, p.94). This is against the ‘proceduralist’ championing of the role of game rules or the game itself, and can be understood to suggest that rules can always be superseded by (transgressive) players without choosing to emphasise how they make possible and constrain play, i.e., their existence as the conditions under which the practices of the self take place.\(^{114}\) T.L. Taylor, for example, remarks that ‘[e]mpirical data shows how players constantly negotiate rules, adopt new ones and discard those afforded by the designers’ (Taylor, 2006; 2009, cited in Sicart, 2011). Players ‘do not just consume, or act as passive audience members of, the game but instead are active cocreators in producing it as meaningful experience and artifact’ (Taylor, 2006, p.133). Similarly, Humphreys has also underscored the point about creation, arguing that gamers are productive in that there is ‘an engagement which serves to create the text each time it is engaged’ (Humphreys, 2005, p.38). The idea appears to be that the game is created at the moment of play itself, and not prior to it; this is also expressed by Consalvo (2009, p.415): ‘games are created through the act of gameplay, which is contingent on acts by players’. Some of these points have already been noted with respect to the division between player-centric and game-centric approaches but active players have also been registered as partaking in a range of out of game activities: players have gone on to construct fan websites (Humphreys, 2005); prepared walkthroughs to assist other players (Consalvo, 2007); produced mods for games; generated game maps or avatar skins (Banks & Humphreys, 2008); it is the full range of human practices, Steinkuehler (2006) argues, that makes play meaningful.

These perspectives can be seen within the context of active player discourses, which come from a longstanding ‘active audience’ tradition in media and culture studies.

\(^{114}\) Linda Hughes noticed that the children played *foursquare* with a number of considerations, such as helping friends, rather than simply trying to improve their performance, leading her to write that ‘[g]ame rules can be interpreted and reinterpreted toward preferred meanings and purposes, selectively invoked or ignored, challenged or defended, changed or enforced to suit the collective goals of different groups of players. In short, players can take the same game and collectively make of it strikingly different experiences’ (Hughes, 1999, p.94). Against this, Juul (2007) added that it should be noted that *foursquare* is a game without any final outcome, that there is no scorekeeping, and that every possible action can be evaluated by several, sometimes conflicting criteria. Thus, the addition of clear evaluative criteria and conditions may be inimical to the diversity of player performance.
(Behrenhausen, 2012, p.2). The emphasis in cultural studies was related to its political reaction against Frankfurt School type media effects analyses that had enjoyed dominance, and which seems particularly clumsy when applied to the domain of computer games. Behrenhausen (2012, p.5) believes that the figure of the active audience has historically emerged in response to various crises that have led their proponents to want to produce the very relationships that they purport to describe and to counter, for example, effects-orientated socio-psychological research. The potential for games, or for whichever media is under discussion, to produce alternative subjectivities is thereby foregrounded when the agency of the users takes priority over the determination of the text.

A focus on transgressive and heterogeneous forms of play or action can indeed trouble monolithic accounts of how players negotiate the game. However, they can also obscure both political and historical insights that might otherwise be gleaned if a much broader perspective beyond that of the specific subversive player is adopted – this is what is likely most needed in a historical ontology of ourselves. To be more precise, this obscuring is not due to the study of transgressive players per se, which, as stated above, is important in its own right, but from the implicit argument that such unpredictable forms of play are potentially endless in their scope, follow no predictable patterns, and lie convincingly outside of our finite categorical comprehension – that they are truly sui generis. This implicit claim is by no means an absolute one, and is arguably made to varying degrees across different literature; the gist of the claim is that the specific and particular not only lies outside of general conceptualisability, but that the subversive, understood as the specific, is in some way so representative of the unboundedness of all activity, of all gameplay, that to attempt to reduce it to the generic and the conceptualisable is utterly unsatisfactory. It is a claim that is evidently not unrelated to the fact that the topic in question is ‘play’ (gameplay), with all its associations with the ‘free’ and ‘undetermined’. In this way, there is an unavoidable slippage between the study of marginal players, and the implications of their non-normative means of engagement with the game, and the analysis of the affordances and possibilities within

115 See John Fiske (1987, p.236) on the active consumer and on the nature of play: ‘[t]he pleasures of play derive directly from the players’ ability to exert control over rules, roles, and representations…Play, for the subordinate, is an active, creative, resistive response to the conditions of their subordination: it maintains their sense of subcultural difference in the face of incorporating forces of dominant ideology.’
the game itself. That is to say, that it is possible to perceive a disguised claim about ontology, about the openness of the game structures.

In a much more expansive sense than the concerns expressed above, the emphasis on transgressive players can be critiqued by numerous perspectives that are indicative of a post-poststructuralist turn to ‘truth’. Foregrounding transgression and the infinite carnivalesque of play can be said to resonate with those schools of interpretation that foreground plurality, heterogeneity, openness, or the infinite play of desire, non-identity, difference, repetition and displacement celebrated by poststructuralism (Jay, 1984, p.512). Peter Dews (2007, p.xiii) argues in Logics of Disintegration that the outcome of this approach is potentially dangerous, since ‘a wilful self-restriction of analysis to the fragmentary and the perspectival renders impossible any coherent understanding of our own historical and cultural situation’. Thus, there is a question concerning the conditions of possibility required for such heterogeneous disintegration, which is an issue that bears on the grasp of the present that is involved in a critical ontology of ourselves. The stubborn insistence on fragmentation fails to comprehend or explain the relationship between the potentially totalising force of systemic operations of power and the fragments under analysis. Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, p.xi) also complain that the awareness of concepts which are too ‘large’, too ‘bulky’ to be immediately observable and describable via the observation of specific situations’ have been neglected of late whilst Hardt and Negri (2000, pp.137-138) have proposed that postmodernist and postcolonialist theories are so intent on combating the remnants of a past form of domination that they fail to recognise the new form that is looming in the present, in which a new paradigm of power ‘has come to replace the modern paradigm and rule through differential hierarchies of the hybrid and fragmentary subjectivities that these theorists celebrate’. This new form, as we have seen in the analysis of governmentality, plays on the obfuscation of sameness under the

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116 For Dews (2007, p.284), poststructuralism can be understood as the point at which the ‘logic of disintegration’ penetrates into the thought which attempts to comprehend it, and it exceeds itself when it fails to perceive that its immersion in fragmentation is not the escape from totality but an effect of it, by which he refers to the totalising tendency of capital. Similarly, Jameson (1991, p.11) has remarked that in order to avoid the endpoint where ‘a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable’, certain categories need to be retained even as their limitations are recognised.

117 Meili Steele (1997, p.6) has also argued that without a hermeneutics of recuperation, a politics of ‘difference’ can threaten to become an indiscriminate appeal to diversity, a utopian projection that provides no language for discussing the identities and traditions of the oppressed or the dominant culture.
guise of difference. Jameson’s description of the logic of capitalism, as a force which ‘operates uniformly over everything and makes heterogeneity a homogenous and standardizing power’ (Jameson, 1988, p.52), is apt as a means of conveying the surface heterogeneity that is in fact underpinned and only made possible by a deeper homogeneity.

The ‘implied player’ as putative solution

The orthogonal analysis seems suitable for considerations of a critical ontology of ourselves to take a generalised perspective, given that the transformation/transfiguration that is called for needs a critical assessment or grasp of the present. Thus, Aarseth’s argument, that a fixation on transgressive players is not as important as an attempt to uncover an implied player, can be understood to counter the fragmentary perspectives that lose sight of the critical ontology of ourselves. However, I will argue that a singular implied player is also in turn deficient since it fails to elucidate the overall context in which self-constitution takes place, which may feature a disparate range of game ‘rationalities.’

Aarseth’s solution to the two problematics that he posed relied on his invocation of the concept of the ‘implied player’, which has its difficulties. This concept is drawn from that of the ‘implied reader’, identified as originating from the literary theory of Wolfgang Iser (1974), who used it to respond to ‘the problem of textual meaning’, or as ‘a means to govern interpretation’ (Aarseth, 2007, p.132): to close down the proliferation of possible interpretations of a text whilst acknowledging that there were more than one possible interpretation. Aarseth’s exposition of Iser’s work is brief, noting that for Iser, the literary text addresses the ideal reader, who is a function of the text, and not a real reader. This ideal reader:

embraces all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly
planted in the structure of the text; he is a construct and in no way to be identified with any real reader. (Iser, 1974, cited in Aarseth, 2007, p.132).\(^{118}\)

On this point, Iser has clarified that:

> The concept of the implied reader is therefore a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him... Thus the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text. (Iser 1978 [1976], p.34).

Aarseth (2007, p.132) indicates that there is a correspondence between the ‘implied reader’ and his ‘implied player’ or ‘implied user’ (as he had previously discussed in Cybertext, as a set of expectations for the player to fulfil) insofar as they are both constructs of the interpreter, as roles or expectations made by the text in order for it to ‘exercise its effect’. As a decidedly formalist device aimed at revealing the predispositions within the text itself, however, we may ask if its role is a limited one for the purposes of the requisite bridging. Aarseth had begun the article by reinforcing his own formalist – rather than intermediate – orientation, having remarked that there is ‘a hierarchical relationship’ (ibid., p.130) between the game and the player: the game can exist without players, and certainly without the historical player, whilst the historical

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\(^{118}\) The concept of the ‘ideal reader’ is being used here. It should be noted that there are ambiguities in what is meant by the ‘implied reader’ in literary theory, of which there are two chief distinctions to be made, although further divisions can be drawn. First, the implied reader can function as a ‘presumed addressee’ to whom the work is directed and whose linguistic codes, ideological norms, and aesthetic ideas must be taken into account if the work is to be understood. In this function, the implied reader is the bearer of the codes and norms presumed in the readership. Second, the abstract reader functions as an image of the ‘ideal recipient’ who understands the work in a way that optimally matches its structure and adopts the interpretive position and aesthetic standpoint put forward by the work. If contradictory evaluative positions are found in a work, the ideal recipient will identify with the entity that is highest in the hierarchy. The position of the ideal recipient is thus more or less pre-determined by the work; the degree of ideological certainty, however, varies from author to author. The difference between the two functions, the presumed addressee and the ideal recipient, assumes greater relevance the more specific the work’s ideology is and the more it calls for a way of thinking that does not correspond to what is generally accepted in a society (see: Schmid, 2013). Exploring the full implications of these distinctions and sub-distinctions is an issue that lies beyond the scope of the present thesis, but for our purposes, it should be remembered that they still turn on there being a single implied player. This is a crucial source of contention, as I will argue, in this chapter.
player cannot exist without the game. From this, he goes on to endorse a famous passage by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989 [1960], p.106), which remarks that ‘all playing is a being-played...Whoever ‘tries’ is in fact the one who is tried. The real subject of the game (this is shown in precisely those experiences where there is only a single player) is not the player but the game itself’. This eventually results in a conception of the implied player as that part of the game which dominates us: ‘[t]he games rule us. We as players are only half-ourselves when we play, the rest of us is temporarily possessed by the implied player’ (Aarseth, 2007, p.133). Therefore, the implied player, on this understanding at least, does not so much fall under the domain of the ‘player’ as it does that of the ‘game’.

Further, two pages deeper into the analysis, Aarseth appears to indicate with some resignation that ‘[w]hile the implied player model is sufficient to understand the expectations laid down by the game for the player, it is not enough to explain real player behaviour’ (Aarseth, 2007, p.132). This seemingly abandons any hopes of the ‘implied player’ effecting the desired bridging insofar as he may have been searching for a mode of analysis that would also be descriptive of player behaviour.

Particular attention ought to settle on there being a single implied player, which does not quite seem adequate to convey the multiplicitous layers and very distinct implicit player positions contained within games (that is, before these positions are winnowed to possibly reveal any homogeneous elements between them). The ergodic pathways are thus over-governed by the implied player as a singular conceptual entity that hinges on the player wanting to ‘play to win’, and to do well within the parameters of the game, without first having acknowledged the plurality that extends beyond this. In other words, what may be needed is an overall sense of the similarities and differences between various player approaches that are invited by the game (between the conjunction of the potentials in the game and a hypothetical class of potential players with the historically appropriate dispositions), rather than a focus on a single type of player who plays to win. It may well be the case that the player approaches are best summed up by the desire to win with regard to a particular game, but this need not always be the case with respect to others. In a symmetrical manner to the emphasis on transgressive players implicitly amounting to claims about the lack of constraints in games, the foregrounding of a single mode of play amounts to a claim about the comparative determination by the game. In the case of some games, however, the latter approach will not be able to account for player engagements being rather diffuse and differentiated. This is not to say that we cannot then infer any commonalities from the
existence of divergent approaches, but that the resultant distillation is more appropriately described as a common ‘rationality’ between the different trajectories or pathways than it is a particular route through the game that is embodied by the implied player. This term refers to Dardot and Laval’s (2013) characterisation of neoliberalism, as the present form of governmentality which operates on the conditions of actions, as a ‘rationality.’

These pathways signify different patterns of action, diverse dispositions and attitudes, and they can be summed up as referring to various player ‘typologies’ as a means of categorising them manageably. The common ‘rationality’ then, if any, would be the effective culmination or condensation of all these player typologies, through a methodology or set of guidelines that takes the various ergodic pathways together, to reveal some element of homogeneity. This is the obverse to the argument of interpretation having been unchecked with the emphasis on transgressive players, leading it to settle in such a way that ended up making claims about computer games that were too open-ended; here, the point is to prevent claims that are too closed. If the focus on transgressive players gave too much to the axis of the subject, then the implied player imparted too much to the axis of power.

Thinking in terms of a range of typologies acknowledges that the conditions that bear on the practices of the self are not necessarily ones that universally inflect the outcome towards one coherent direction, exerting a universal gravitational pull on all individuals. If we reject power as ‘a monolithic and inexorable force that saturates all social relations’ in favour of it as a ‘tendency within modern forms of control’ (McNay, 1992, p.43), then there is the further issue of how monolithic that tendency (or ‘rationality’) may be. It is possible that there are indeed such overarching tendencies or rationalities, but this has to be carefully argued. In order for the game to be adequately designated as exerting the universal gravitational pull described above, a satisfactory means of synthesising together the multiple effects (or typologies) must be given, and it must then be shown that there is a convergence to certain patterns of action amongst the typologies. This would be, on a Foucauldian analysis, a concatenation of micro-reactions in a systemic fashion.
Rational schemas, modes of generalisation, and player typologies

How then, do we derive the player typologies? The study of designers’ explicit player typologies corresponds to Foucault’s method regarding the investigation of rational schemas or programmes of intention, as will be outlined below, and constitutes one possibility. The study of these typologies offers an insight into the ‘rationality’ that underlies their formulation, to the understanding of player self-constitution implicit within them, regardless of the extent to which they were actually realised. Although there is a reliance on a form of generalisation on the part of the interpreter in this approach, it is a different approach to that of interpreter-constructed typologies, which will be the method employed in the next chapter, and which constitutes another possibility.

I begin by considering the first possibility – designers’ player typologies. In ‘Questions of Method’, Foucault (1991c, p.81) clarified that his intention had not been to describe ‘real life’ in the prisons; Bentham’s Panopticon, was, after all, not a very good description of the witch’s brew that was the actual functioning of prisons. However, he stressed that the theoretical schemas with which he was concerned were not merely imaginary or utopian; their existence corresponded to a whole series of diverse practices and strategies (such as the search for effective, measured, unified penal mechanisms, or, we might think, the need, for the new management literature analysed by Boltanski and Chiapello, to defuse forms of critique against capitalism). These programmes go on to induce a whole series of effects in the real, crystallising into institutions, informing individual behaviour, and acting as grids of perception and evaluation (ibid., p.81). The distinction is not so much one that lies between the ‘purity of the ideal’ and the ‘impurity of the real’ (ibid., p.80), but that there are ‘different strategies which are mutually opposed, composed and superposed so as to produce permanent and solid effects which can perfectly well be understood in terms of their rationality, even though they don’t conform to the initial programming: this is what gives the resulting apparatus (dispositif) its solidity and suppleness’ (ibid., pp.80-1). He stated that these rational schemas are not hidden meanings that are retrospectively discovered by historians (this is his objection against the Weberian ideal type), but explicit, calculated programmes.\footnote{O’Leary (2002, pp.98-9) also underscores the rationality at stake, though his reading is not premised on transparent rational schemas, but the ‘rationality’ that results from a certain intersection, stating that ‘it does not really matter how many Greeks actually practiced the ancient techniques of the self, just as it does not really matter whether the}
However, it has been objected that these rational schemas are not ready-made for the interpreter, i.e., there is a form of generalisation going on. Mark Poster (1986, p.217) deduced that Foucault’s method in *Discipline and Punish* required ‘the ability of the critic to go beyond the intentional level of the discourse to locate a system of problematics that are at once outside the text and within it, and once elaborated reveal a new level of significance in the text.’

What then is involved in such a generalisation? And what are the entanglements between the analysis of the concrete imaginaries that form such programmes and the analysis of the lived realities that give rise to them and that are birthed by them? Paul Veyne (2010, p.34) wonders what Foucault’s description of the discourse of amorous pleasures of ancient Greece, or for that matter, the governmentalism of the ancient regime, would be if not a schematisation of a historical formation or Weberian ideal type. Veyne believes that Foucault was keen only to avoid essences, and that he had multiple projects for prison reform in the nineteenth century were every actually implemented. Rather, what is important is to understand the ‘rationality’ of these discourses, the way that they interacted with real contemporary practices, and consequently, the forms of power/knowledge relations which they instituted.’

Discipline ‘is the generalisation and the *connection* of different techniques which are themselves responses to local objectives (apprenticeships in schools, the formation of troupes capable of handling rifles)' (Foucault, cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p.132, emphasis added). Bentham and others had been motivated to establish methods for the rehabilitation of criminals, not to bring about the institution of systems of discipline itself, which is uncovered by the critic. On this point, Rabinow (1991 [1984], p.10) has also pointed out Foucault offered little explanation to his readers about ‘the interplay of intentional action, socioeconomic change, particular interests, and accidents’.

For Weber (1978, p.19), it was essential to understand that ‘sociological analysis both abstracts from reality and at the same time helps us to understand it, in that it shows with what degree of approximation a concrete historical phenomenon can be subsumed under one or more of these [abstract] concepts’. The generic or abstract is necessary as a yardstick for comparing empirical reality to a simplified model of it which one-sidedly emphasises a certain side (Parkin, 2003, p.29). The problem, as Weber saw it, was that the social scientist is caught in a dilemma when he chooses his conceptual apparatus: ‘[w]hen his concepts are very general...he is like to leave out what is most distinctive to them [the phenomena]’ but when he ‘particularizes the phenomena under discussion, he allows no room for comparison with related phenomena. The notion of the ideal type was meant to provide escape from this dilemma (Cosser, 1977, p.223). Weber concluded that there is a need for abstraction where the interpreter engages in comparisons and hypotheses. The ‘ideal type’ is a construct that serves the investigator as a measuring rod to ascertain similarities as well as deviations in concrete cases, although Weber was aware that no conceptual apparatus could ever do full justice to the diversity of particular phenomena. It is seldom ever the case that a real phenomenon can be found which corresponds exactly to one of these ideally constructed pure types, which, to be clear, does not refer to statistical averages. In any case, however, there is no sure escape.
overlooked and misinterpreted Weber’s nominalism for an essentialism. Similarly, Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982, p.132) also contest the distance between Foucault and Weber.\(^\text{122}\) It is not that there must necessarily then be recourse to ‘essences’ or ‘ideals’ in a strong sense, but that the steps being taken in any process of generalisation should be made clear, and can also have a built-in sense of their own contingency.

To any mode of generalisation, especially those involved in critical projects, there ought to be attached certain qualifications. The efforts to consolidate divergence in favour of convergence, of similarity and commonality, in order to make analyses possible, is at the cost of recognising the forms of possible heterogeneity in favour of discerning homogeneity. As such, in order to talk about computer games, one will need to adopt a position with regard to the openness or closedness of the kinds of statements being made, and to be self-reflexively aware of the generalisations at work. This is especially so if we attempt to move beyond a particular game to discussing computer games in general, and in relation to the contemporary situation or system of power. Following Foucault’s work on rational schemas, we can note that in the conscious construction of player type categories by the designer, there is much we can learn about the operation of contemporary power and its historical formation despite the lack of emphases on marginal and unexpected practices. However, the self-reflexive realisation of the generalisations at work is also necessary in this process.\(^\text{123}\)

Player typologies themselves, in the existing literature, constitute a messy category. They are formulated or derived from a variety of means; some can reflect explicit programs of authorial intention whilst others arise from observations of players. They have traditionally been linked more with categories derived from a range of theorisations based on empirical observations than with categories held in the designers’ minds based on their own conceptions of the game itself. Richard Bartle’s (1996) famous player typologies were based on his theorisation of observations about player behavior in Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) and what could be inferred about player from accusations of universalisation, since ‘[n]o matter how local the focus of attention, some perspectives will always be excluded’ (McNay, 1992, p.124).

\(^{122}\) Therefore, Foucault’s genealogical pronouncements, which would have him refrain from forms of ‘deep’ analysis, staying only on the surface, may not always have been sincerely followed.

\(^{123}\) The marginal is obliquely considered insofar as explicit programmes of intention must have accounted for the nature and prolificacy of resistance to them – one need only consider the design of prisons – or be faced with abject failure, which is not to say that they must have predicted every possibility, or that they cannot be destabilised or their intentions are thwarted.
preferences. He has stated that his research was driven by wanting to inform designers of the games that people wanted to play for ‘fun’. The resulting taxonomy of ‘achievers’, ‘socializers’, ‘explorers’, and ‘killers’, derived from positioning oneself within two axes – action vs. interaction and player-orientation vs. world-orientation – has been very influential for game designers and scholars.\textsuperscript{124} Hamari & Tuunanen (2014, p.46), in their ‘meta-synthesis’ of the literature on player types, state that ‘the amount of dimensions pertaining to player types is rather low in the respective literature and very much based on Bartle’s (1996) original work’.\textsuperscript{125} Nicholas Yee (2007) has revisited the Bartle types, arguing that it suffered from limitations in how accurately it represented contemporary players. He has stated that ‘Bartle’s Types puts people in one of 4 boxes and argues that the other 3 boxes say nothing about you’ (Yee, no date, p.16). With his components model, one’s scores on all the components matter. For Yee, the three factors that motivate (online) gamers are ‘Achievement’, ‘Social aspects’ and ‘Immersion’, which are then sub-divided into a total of ten components. This in turn prompted Bartle (2004) to introduce four new player categories – ‘learners’, ‘experts’, ‘doers’, and ‘instinctives’ – that enable him to theorise players shifting from one category to another.\textsuperscript{126}

The analysis of games as intentional artefacts aimed to bring about a register of experiences – this is a point inextricably tied in to the production of computer games in an entertainment industry that often tries to reliably manufacture those experiences – cannot but take into account the thought-processes of the game designers, the rationalities on which they draw. Game designers can only conceive of a finite number of player placeholders and likely experiences; they must attempt to anticipate what the player is likely to know and what could have been forgotten at various stages of the game, as well as what the player might find cognitively challenging or kinaesthetically trivial. Therefore, although designers can craft worlds with emergent properties and unexpected outcomes or player strategies, they will usually have a not unsophisticated idea of what will likely occur. They are faced with having to balance the difficulty so that the game feels right and appeals to a sufficient number of players. Further, they

\textsuperscript{124} First of the types is Achiever who prefers action and is world-oriented. An Explorer prefers interaction and is also world-oriented. Killers prefer action and are player-oriented. The last type is Socialiser who prefers interaction with other players.
\textsuperscript{125} The field of study in player types is perhaps surprisingly uniform. The current studies could be synthesized into five key dimensions pertaining to motivations of play/orientation of the player: Achievement, Exploration, Sociability, Domination, and Immersion (Hamari & Tuunanen, 2014, p.46).
\textsuperscript{126} There is a range of other work in this area (see: Rouse III, 2004; Fullerton, et al., 2004).
have to balance the relative strength of different selectable factions or characters in the game such that variation in strategies is not discouraged by the presence of an overwhelmingly effective one, which would lead to a stagnation of the game and resentment from the players. With games that periodically receive updates and patches, this balancing is often done after the release date, after factoring in actual player behaviour so that some strategies become ‘nerfed’, or reduced in effectiveness. Unforeseen strategies that are seen to upset the balance of the game are often eliminated.

Considerations of this finite number of multiple typologies in the current climate of the games industry have an economic bent; they often arise from the necessity of justifying to stakeholders the appropriateness of the game to the target market, which is perhaps most easily accomplished by situating a game within a conventional genre, and to focus the appeal of the game. Hamari and Tuunanen (2014, p.29) have noted that with the new business models, game publishers have tended to subject the entire game to scrutiny, prompting designers to employ ‘the marketing practices of segmentation and differentiation as part of game design’. Bateman and Boon (2005) also believe that the first step of game design is to study audiences, and they use the Myers-Briggs system to distil four clusters of play motivation. To overlook the player placeholders that exist for the designers is to naively assume that they are open-minded about the ways in which potential players will play. Designers have an understanding of the ‘social treasury’ at their would-be player-base’s disposal in order to have a sense of the above, of what is estimated to be enjoyable and what is not. This leads to categories or typologies of players and the study and documentation of individuals, which resonates with Foucault’s notion of ‘the birth of the sciences of man’ (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p.160), where the accumulation of individual documentation in a systemic ordering makes ‘possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterization of collective facts, the calculation of gaps between individuals, their distribution in a given population’ (Foucault, 1977, cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p.159). This kind of categorisation

127 In marketing theory, ‘[t]he goal of segmentation is to better serve customers by being able to offer products that better match their needs and wants’ (Hamari & Tuunanen, 2014, p.30).
goes hand in hand with the suspicion that it facilitates subjection, with subjects’ actions and intentions being predicted and pre-empted.\(^{128}\)

Further, given that certain typologies are widely known to the players themselves, with *Magic: The Gathering* players being especially encouraged to refer to themselves as ‘Timmys’ or ‘Vorthoses’ and so on, there is a *self*-declaration of the truth of our own preferences in the manner in which Foucault referred to sexuality fixing us to our identities in a constraining way. MTG typologies (psychographic profiles) are very established, and are applied when new sets come out.\(^{129}\) Discourses on the subject have recently brought together psychological statements and economics statements together into a fusion (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p.285) that has had pretensions of scientific status. The ‘psy’ discourses have ‘made it possible to conduct individuals on the basis of knowledge of their internal constitution’ (ibid.), which forms ‘individuals who have learnt to conceive themselves as psychological beings’. It has become possible to ‘act technically on the psychic terrain through tailor-made systems of stimulation, encouragement, reward and punishment’ (ibid., pp.285-6).

Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p.12-13) have found that most game designers do *not* follow the iterative design method that involves inviting feedback from players at every step of game design, whilst Sotamaa (2007) has discovered that designers in many occasions rely on personal experience and their own intuition of market demand. In this sense, designers do work on the basis of their own preconceptions, without support

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\(^{128}\) In using typologies, however, as a means to *critique* power structures, we may be using dividing practices against the conditions that gave rise to them.

\(^{129}\) Although *Magic: The Gathering* is a card game, it has been adapted into computer games many times, including the recent *Magic Duels* (Stainless, 2015). Its publisher, Wizards of the Coast, is well-known for its use of psychographic profiles, which separates players into categories based on their psychological make-up. Timmy, the ‘power gamer’, likes to win big; he cares more about the quality of his wins than the quantity of them, and accordingly prefers cards that are exciting but not necessarily ‘good value’ for their casting cost, such as powerful eldrazi and hydras. Johnny is the ‘creative gamer’ who likes to win with style, using decks with strange and unique effects that can be brought together into a winning combination. Examples include cards like ‘Triskaidekaphobia’, which is an Enchantment that wins the game if the opponent’s life total is exactly 13; the deck will be tailored towards fending off the opponent’s attacks whilst manipulating their life total. Spike is the ‘competitive player’ who plays to win, and will use the most effective deck available to do so, whichever that may happen to be, caring more about the quantity of wins than the quality (Rosewater, 2013, no page). Rosewater (2015, no page) has stated that Vorthos and Mel are not the fourth and fifth psychographics, since what connects the psychographics is that they want to experience something, an adrenaline and/or emotional rush; they are not psychological in origin, but aesthetic.
from empirical findings, and the rational schemas that they hold are thereby somewhat insulated from the witch’s brew of reality, in the form of empirical verification. These conceptions go on to shape how players actually play, since developers may proceed from typologies to then ‘shape in-game mechanisms to suit the needs of these players’ (Humphreys, 2008, pp.154-155), which then informs existing work on typologies. Some game designers have even ‘made sure that the game has the elements that resonate with every player type in Bartle’s typology’ (Hamari & Tuunanen, 2014, p.39). Consequently, there may be a situation where ‘gamer typologies are self-fulfilling and self-validating’ (ibid., p.48), since there is an interpenetrating relationship between how established player typologies affect the design of games and how they also further strengthen the common ways to play. Players’ responses to standard gamic cues and conventions can become almost second nature, which places barriers on innovative approaches that go against them. In this way, there is a feedback loop between player observations (and the means by which it is conducted and understood), the formulation of typologies, the design of games, and the behaviour of players. Designers will also have to work, however, to keep these assumptions about different approaches and player typologies from resulting in a game that spoon-feeds players into obvious and limited solutions and strategies (given that some players are sensitive to not having to do the expected). This is not, by any means, a prerequisite for a commercially successful game.

For understanding the rational schemas and explicit programmes of intention within games, the player typologies employed by game designers will be a correspondingly useful resource to indicate which kinds of practices constitute the ideal types. This would itself constitute an adequate level of analysis, and we can proceed straight onto the stage of comparing the typologies themselves for any overarching ‘rationalities’ or similar patterns of action that there may be. However, given that the critic or interpreter has been shown to be unavoidably involved in forms of generalisation in their use of the designer typologies, and in going beyond the intentional level of the discourse, there is surely no need to limit the analysis to designer typologies alone for the sake of purity. Designer typologies could be seen to be only one of the factors that should fit into our matrix of understanding of how games inculcate certain practices of the self.

With respect to the interpreter-made typologies, the interpreter should not be prevented from considering the assumptions involved in their assessment of how historical player dispositions are likely to conjoin with the expectations or rationalities in
the game. What is presumed by the interpreter, and their formulation of the typologies, is of importance to the inference of the rationality at stake. I do not wish to exclude any considerations from the purview of the interpreter: the ‘social treasuries’ of a likely typology of player types; how their dispositions are likely to mesh with the feedback loops in the game; the cultures of play surrounding that game genre; the interplay between marketing hype, player discussions about the game, and player expectations; and so on. The more that this is made explicit, the more clearly it will be possible to see where disagreements with respect to formulation may lie between different interpreters.

The concern here with clarity may drive towards an attempt to systemise the methods by which the interpreter is to arrive at their typologies, and the respective weightings to be given to each of the considerations outlined above. It would, however, be mistaken to be over-confident in the prospect of systemisation given that the study of the entanglement between the above considerations is still such a formative area in the field of game studies. Thus, it would be beneficial not to exclude potentially interesting insights with respect to how an interpreter decides to formulate their typologies that might otherwise have fallen outside any putative systemisation. I do not want to attempt, at this junction, to categorise the steps by which any interpreter ought to proceed in their formulation of player typologies.

The issue of players’ ‘social treasuries’ can be taken in gradated levels of precisions, as befitting the kind of analysis in question, from niche examples such as the members of a particular class of pupils, to all the readers of Edge Magazine, to anyone who has access to a Playstation 4, to the contemporary subject in general.

It is true, nevertheless, that some considerations are likely to occupy a relatively central position regardless of other factors. An understanding of what might be termed the broad genre conventions of games, such as the fact that a certain amount of information concerning various numerical values in the game needs to be recalled by the player in order for them to be able to competently play a real-time strategy game, is likely to be essential. One such example would be the attack value and attack bonus values that an Egyptian priest gets against myth units in Age of Mythology, which would inform a player’s decision as to how to spend a limited amount of the gold resource in order to, for instance, defeat an opponent’s titan (a powerful myth unit). This convention is in contrast to, for example, FPS games, which tend to be less dependent on the player’s recall of an array of numbers in order to be able to make informed decisions, and more on the honing of good instincts to various situations. Such genre considerations are likely to be quite foundational to the formulation of the appropriate typologies for a game, since the differing dedication among players to mastering the above-mentioned knowledge with respect to strategy games is likely to characterise divisions between the distinct typologies involved. However, although it may be useful to make these broad conventions explicit, there still remains a panoply of other potentially conflicting considerations, such as the game in question possibly straddling
The next question is to ask what the practices of the self associated with each typology may be. This consists of the repeated observable patterns of actions as a manifestation of a relation to self, as attributed by the interpreter to the player types. The interpreter will have formulated what are essentially a series of player ‘trajectories’ through the game. These are the different paths through the game taken by the respective typologies, and which correspond to a whole series of player actions. It will be through these different gamic trajectories that we can trace outward heterogeneity, albeit in search of any hidden homogeneity of common relations to self.

Two points are of relevance here regarding the inference that can be drawn from the outwards patterns of action. First, that given our following the framework of Foucault’s study of accounts of the practices of the self, or ‘observable manifestations of historically variable experiences of the self’ (Hoy, 1986, p.17), there is a point about the gap between actions, on the one hand, and the attitudes or ethoi that gave rise to the actions, on the other. For the ancients, actions bore a close proximity to principles, since ‘even as a philosophical principle, the care of the self remained a form of activity. The term epimeleia refers not just to an attitude of awareness or a form of attention focused on oneself; it designates a regular occupation, a work with its methods and objectives’ (Foucault, 2005, p.493). Hoy (1986, p.17) remarks that a source of influence on Foucault may well indeed have been Heidegger, for whom ‘self-understanding is not revealed introspectively through access to a private, internal domain. Instead, self-understanding is shown in actions, and especially through patterns of action’ (emphasis added). As such, ‘self-understanding can be studied objectively through a matrix of social and discursive practices’ (ibid., p.18) whose historical variability shows the similar variability of self-understanding. That is to say, attitudes are essentially evidenced by actions in a way that may place them beyond the self-consciousness of the individual in question. The overall mode of being of the agent as a whole was a more critical question than the intention underlying a particular act (Han, 2002, p.159), and a moral action commits an agent to a certain mood of being. This evokes Aristotle’s definition

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genre divides, or there being other factors that diminish the preponderance of players’ dedication to one kind of genre-specific task being the best means by which to formulate typologies. Thus, there must be a degree of wariness towards the basic notion that player typologies are best drawn along lines defined by well-known genre conventions; it is pragmatic to underscore the dangers of systemisation. Foucault’s (1994, p.612) conception of ‘thought’ was at times that of a preontological understanding immanent to the practices themselves, but at others the reflective activity through which the subject constitutes itself (Han, 2002, p.194).
of *hexis* as a ‘permanent disposition’ progressively acquired through the repetition of specific actions: ‘[t]hus one becomes more moderate the more consistently one abstains from excess, the braver the more one faces danger. The act does not completely disappear in its being effected but subsists by leaving its trace in the subject’s potentiality as an *hexis*’ (Han, 2002, p.160). Therefore, the interpreter’s inference or formulation of player typologies as trajectories through the game are also formulations of the *hexeis* or modes of being of those hypothetical players, incorporating those dimensions that we would characterise as intention, motivation, and even competence, given that competence is developed through recursive actions. As such, it is important that the player trajectories are taken holistically, and not as a series of isolated actions without regard to the animating mode of being that unites actions under a disposition, a set of skills, knowledges, expectations, and even ludic affectations.

The second point pertains to the fact that the relations to self do not exist in isolation, but in relation to what Foucault called a ‘moral code’ with historical relevance. The practices of the self can be contextualised within Foucault’s distinction between three aspects of ‘morality’: the moral code, or the set of values and rules of action prescribed to individuals in a given setting; the real behaviour of individuals, or the margins of obedience and transgression in relation to the code; and the way one makes oneself conform to, or stray from, the code (1992 [1984], pp.25-8). This last aspect was the relationship to oneself. He remarked that it has four major aspects (Foucault, 1984 [1983], pp.352-370), which are captured by the model (*grille d’analyse*) that he developed for mapping the practices in any ethical system. There is the ethical substance, that part of oneself that is taken to be the relevant domain for ethical judgement; the mode of subjection, the way in which the individual establishes his or her relation to moral obligations and rules; the self-forming activity or ethical work that one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself into an ethical subject; and

Davidson (1986) emphasises that though ‘ethics (the self’s relation to itself)’ was distinguished by Foucault from both the ‘moral code’, and from ‘people’s actual behaviour’; the former did not deny the importance of any of these latter elements. There is no doubt a measure of, if not arbitrariness, then laxness of application of the grid, which complicates any attempts to apply it in a manner that is faithful to the original intention. O’Leary (2002, p.85) has remarked that ‘Foucault does not sufficiently distinguish between the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ of ancient ethics’, which is to say, between the second and fourth aspects – the formal cause and the final cause. This leads to his emphasising the aesthetic aims (the formal cause) of Classical and Stoical ethics over their heautocratic and reason-oriented telos in his aestheticist slanted interpretation.
finally, the telos, the mode of being at which one aims in behaving ethically (Davidson, 2005, p.126). Foucault proposes that ‘the various ways in which continuities, modifications, and ruptures can occur in one or more of these four dimensions’ so that in some periods, ‘the ethical substance may remain constant, whereas the mode of subjection gradually alters’ whilst in others ‘the ethical substance, mode of subjection, self-forming activity, and telos may be so inextricably intertwined that they undergo change together’ (Davidson, 2005, p.131).

With respect to computer games, using the model is a means of focusing our enquiry around a ‘moral code’. The code is something that can by definition be transgressed, so it cannot be equated with the game’s rules or laws, unless the player engages in modding. It must instead be styles or norms of play behaviour. In single-player games, as in multi-player games, game cultures grow up that give rise to various styles and expectations, and which likely have variation between games. Many of these benchmarks are by no means clearly defined, and some may take the particular manifestation that they do only in the player’s mind, though this does not mean that they are completely detached from socio-cultural norms of gameplay. The player’s conception of these benchmarks will constitute what is, for them, the moral code, as an inter-personal normative standard. In most cases, the system of incentives and disincentives within the game, perhaps in the form of a scoring system, will quite straightforwardly form a measure by which players judge how well or poorly they have done. The player, upon understanding the causal relations in the game via the analytical learning cycle, is tied into this ‘moral code’. Every gamic action usually impacts upon that code in a positive or negative way, which then presents the player with having to give justifications to themselves for any deviations from it. As such, the interpreter will have to decide on what the norms of player behaviour or moral code in relation to a game may be, before analysing the various modes of being in the typologies that adhere to or deviate from it in varying degrees, as well as their justifications for adherence or deviation and the conditions under which those justifications are deployed. One might oppose the code of doing as well as much as one is able, for example, by avoiding levelling-up altogether, or by refusing to defeat opponents, because one has a curious, experimental approach to the limits of the game, or because one is seeking recognition from others for accomplishing a difficult task.

It is true that both designer typologies and interpreter-made typologies are ways of gauging a prevalent rationality, which is the case even if those typologies bear little
relation to actual player practice. However, it may also be useful to challenge and test these presumptive models for the purposes of understanding actual player practices. To this end, I propose that there seems to be no reason why these interpreter-constructed player typologies and any respective weightings given to them in terms of how likely they are to be representative of real player behaviour, should not be subject to empirical falsification, or at least to be informed on the basis of empirical evidence. These weightings will influence the assessment of the extent of the concatenation of micro-reactions, the extent to which there is an overall ‘rationality’ to a game that can be found, if not in all the typologies, then perhaps in all but the most marginal one. That is to say, the abstract measuring sticks that we use, which are the player typologies, should be tested. As tools that might be invoked by the game studies theorist with a grasp of the type of game in question, its conventions, cultural reception, player communities, and hence the manner in which its rules are likely to constrain players, they should not be entirely disconnected from empirical evidence pertaining to how actual players in fact play games. The theorist can hardly advance an analysis without such a grasp. As such, claims made on the basis of the former should be modifiable or even falsifiable on the basis of the latter. The utility of the interpreter-constructed typologies can be called into question if they bear little correlation with how most players play the game, or how a class of players plays the game if the interpreter was attempting to make claims about that class.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to exhaustively probe the kinds of empirical evidence that would be relevant, and to advance detailed guidance with regard to the manner in which it is to be pursued, particularly in terms of how player interviews are to be conducted, or questionnaires designed. In any case, it should be re-emphasised that the aim of the empirical testing would be to verify two key points. Firstly, whether the typologies adequately cover the ways in which players actually engage with the game. This need not, of course, meet the impossible standard of covering all conceivable players, but must be able to adequately account for a proportion deemed satisfactory by a standard defended by the interpreter. Second, whether, in the inference of an overall rationality, the typologies reflect the distribution or weighting of player styles. For example, if the interpreter-constructed typologies assumed that two player typologies accounted for the vast majority of players, and that there was a sufficient degree of commonality between those two to warrant the conclusion that an overall rationality could be inferred from just those alone, despite the fact that there are other marginal
typologies which do not accord with that rationality, then such a position would face serious difficulties if it were shown that the other typologies were not quite so marginal, or those two dominant typologies not quite so pervasive.

Any process of refutation arising from empirical findings, however, is potentially complex: the typologies cannot be directly refuted given that they are ‘ideal types’, but they can be gradually shown to be obsolete as evidence accumulates to build a picture of player practices in which those ideal types appear to have no place. This effectively amounts to a check on the assumptions of Aarseth’s critical player-theorist, and is a means for player-centric approaches to push back on the basis of any conflicting understandings of players’ ‘social treasuries’ that they may bring to bear. It should be remembered that the typologies correspond to different styles of play, and not necessarily to different players – a single player may of course choose to occupy different typologies on different playthroughs. As such, empirical data should not be hasty to attribute only one style to each player, particularly for the purposes of refuting a set of interpreter-constructed typologies.

Finally, following this, we proceed to enquiring whether there are there similar patterns of action between the different typologies, however they have been obtained. There are a number of complex interpretive questions here that should not be rendered formulaic, but ought to be left to the judgment of the interpreter. How many different typologies of players should factor into our analyses of each game? And in attempting to distil the common elements between them, which should receive the most attention or weighting? The way in which any homogeneity in the patterns of action would be adduced between the different typologies would be on a level abstracted from looking at correspondences between isolated actions, such as whether a particular point was reached in a game or a certain hidden secret discovered, since this is unlikely to give an overview of any player’s conduct throughout the game. The interpreter would instead attempt to infer an overall accord in their patterns. For example, the spatial memorisation of level layouts may be necessary for speed-running player-types in a certain game, but also needed, albeit to a lesser extent, and in a slightly different way, for a different player typology, such as one that wanted to uncover all the secrets in the game. This commonality between the two typologies might be evidenced in their practices by their repetitive play of certain levels for the purposes of memorisation and

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135 Each group signals a different kind of use or appropriation of the technology and the privileging of one group is, after all, always a commitment to a side in the ‘battle’ over how technologies are used and the future directions that they will take.
discovery. Though we could say that there are different motivations at stake, and there will also no doubt also be differences in the actions themselves, it can still be said that the game has prompted similar patterns of action. Other games, in contrast, might not feature such forms of engagement.

In this way, rather than there being a singular implied player, the analysis has been spread or diffused into the ‘rationality’ or ‘rationalities’ of the game, by which I mean the attempt at the articulation of common tendencies in the conjunction between power-subject that spans across a particular range of, if not all of the player typologies. These tendencies lead us to an understanding of the conditions that underlie the practices of self-formation, though it is not possible to detach them completely from the dispositions that were posited to bring them to light. Such conditions work to normalise our self-constitution: competences, dispositions, and patterns of action, which have all been brought together through our reading of *epimeleia heautou*. From this, I propose that we read the implied ethos whilst self-reflexively bearing in mind that this reading is made on the basis of the various forms of generalisations made on the part of the interpreter, as described above. Given that this process refers to the conditions extant within particular games for a relevant range of players, it prevents the analysis of games and the historical ontology of ourselves from floating so freely that we lose sight of the real constraints within computer games, or being too affixed to reductive connections to some procrustean bed of totalising control or radical countercultural potential. We are made to acknowledge their ergodic, labyrinthine status, but are not tied to the specific subjective experiences of individual players, or tethered to a single hypothetical player. And beyond this mode of analysis, we can also try to draw inferences about similar patterns of action between different games, perhaps starting with games of the same genre. Further still, rationalities across games could be compared, with a view to comparisons with broader rationalities.

Thus, this chapter has made the argument that considering computer games in terms of ‘rationalities’ confers certain advantages. I have refrained from the claim that these rationalities are innately contained within the objects’ potentials in and of themselves, as conditions of possibility that hold in all possible cases of play. Rather, they are ‘tendencies’ that are revealed when the objects are brought into conjunction with various player dispositions of historical relevance. After having posited these dispositions or player typologies, the interpreter is engaged in looking for systemic tendencies between the typologies and then perhaps also between games, as well as in
drawing broader inferences with rationalities that are thought to exist beyond games, particularly with the articulation of neoliberalism given by Dardot and Laval as competitive, calculative, and efficiency-orientated. I have argued for the use of multiple typologies in a way that self-reflexively acknowledges the constructedness of those typologies by the interpreter, as well as the modes of generalisation used to draw inferences on common ‘rationalities’ that may inhere between them. This model of analysing the conjunction between power and the subject will be applied, in the next chapter, to the role-playing game *Oblivion.*
Chapter four

Ambivalent asceses in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*

So far, we have explored Foucault’s framing of governmentality as the encounter between the techniques of domination and techniques of the self, and Dardot and Laval’s contention that neoliberalism is the new mode of governmentality. ‘The main innovation of neoliberal technology’, they write, ‘precisely consists in directly connecting the way a man ‘is governed from without’ to the way ‘he governs himself within’ (2013, p.264). The personal enterprise has become the contemporary ethos, in which self-governance can be said to be in accordance with competition, efficiency, and risk-taking, and with ‘energy, initiative, ambition, calculation and personal responsibility’ (Rose, 1996b, p.154). In the new government of subjects, the subject is enjoined to conform internally to an image of competition, innovation, and the search for excellence, striving to be as efficient as possible; there is a need to improve, which leads the subject to incessantly perfect their results and performance (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p.265). All of this articulates the grid of intelligibility for understanding the context of contemporary practices from which we are enjoined, in the Dionysian sense of Foucault’s ethics, to wander away.

I mentioned in the previous chapter that the ‘rationality’ of a game constitutes the conditions that suggest certain actions and practices over others. This chapter aims to further explore the conjunction between power and the subject with regard to a case study. What kinds of active subjectification are catalysed or facilitated? How do the demands of the game and the disposition of the player converge? What can be said about the practices of the self that are involved? It is not assumed at the outset that the game, understood as a power structure, will necessarily operate in a systematic fashion through the various typologies, or that it will echo the extant ‘rationalities’ of broader structures of power. However, the issue is approached with a mindfulness that elements of the game can bring out certain patterns of actions without compelling any actions in particular. The player can feel that these coincide with their own intentions, engaging intuitively in the resultant practices of the self – developing a relationship to the ‘truth’ of the game that is ethopoetic. Therefore, the question arises as to whether one plays in
accordance with the rationality embedded into the game even when one is playing in accordance with self-set goals rather than strict gamic demands. The circumscription of freedom at stake does not originate from a determined authority, like Foucault’s example of our following the contents of a book, but from a series of feedback loops that exist in a system that exhibits a ‘rationality,’ or number of rationalities.

Before applying the method of analysis developed in the previous chapter to *Oblivion*, I first turn to the issue of self-constitution in role-playing games, and re-iterate that my approach is one that looks at the conjunction between the player and the game.

**Playing on the boundaries of the ‘gameplay condition’**

As I have mentioned in the introduction, contemporary games boasting ludically complex and emergent structures are comparatively ‘less linear’ than their ancestors. Additional and further gameplay at higher levels in those classic games was arguably qualitatively of the same kind, only speedier, more intense, less forgiving of mistakes. Although players may have found that the strategies that they had hitherto employed were no longer adequate at the higher levels, they could be certain of what came next were they able to pass the level; this could be framed as a straightforward ‘gameplay contract’ between the player and the game. If the player did not enjoy the game, its rhythms, the aporiae and epiphanies of its challenges, they would know that there was little point in progressing to play ‘more of the same’.

Almost all single-player games make the player responsible for, at the most foundational level, the continuation or discontinuation of the game; more refined distinctions are of course possible given the inherently algorithmic and numeric/quantitative nature of computer games that make them highly suitable for...

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136 The significance of this argument consists in the view that the direction of technological development has manifested in the form of a transition towards games in which players more frequently occupy this boundary – they do not exactly play with the game, but nor are their decisions so often bound by the threat of gamic discontinuation – and that this development is far from neutral.

137 Miguel Sicart (2009, p.71) has drawn upon Alain Badiou’s concept of the ‘event’ to propose that the ‘player as subject’ is created only when they are faithful to the series of imperatives and the delimited boundaries that are imposed by the game. I have characterised the latter as one possible framing of the ‘moral code’, of which there may be other alternatives, as a result of various conventions of play. The ‘truthfulness’ of the player, on my analysis, is to a mode of being or to practices of the self that bear a certain, but non-specific relation to the ‘moral code’.
performing the kinds of calculation that can provide near-instant evaluative feedback to the player that assist in learning and self-monitoring. However, the gamic compulsion at work in some games arguably relies not so much on the player’s need to defeat an obstacle or complete a challenge – and not giving up until it has been done, than it does on far less ‘disciplinary’ means of procedurally gauging success or failure, on the player’s assessment of their own play in accordance with their own expectations and evaluation. It is in this sense that we might discern an accord between the changing landscape of games, and the ‘intensification’ of techniques of governmentality that depend upon freedom outlined above.

Single-player RPG games perhaps occupy a particularly strategic position in abetting the self-construction that occupies a central role in the formation of contemporary subjectivity and which resonates with what may be broadly termed ‘neoliberal subjects’. As the site for Dragon Age: Origins (Bioware, 2009) proclaims: ‘[y]our Story, Your Way – With its emotionally compelling story, players choose with whom they wish to forge alliances or crush under their mighty fist, redefining the world with the choices they make and how they wield their power’ (Electronic Arts, 2008). Thus, players are sold the promise of the expression of their individuality. There is a common rhetoric of the authentic self emerging in the course of a player’s in-game ethical decisions. Similarly, for Dragon Age: Inquisition (Bioware, 2014), the marketing point is: ‘[c]hange the world: Deciding the fate of villages and ransacking keeps will shape the world around you. As a leader, you can deploy followers of the inquisition to act on your behalf’ (Bioware, 2014).

Contemporary RPGs often feature a disparate range of time-consuming challenges (consider card games such as Gwent in The Witcher 3 (CD Projekt Red, 2015), or Triple Triad in Final Fantasy VIII (Square, 1999), as well as other kinds of ‘mini-games’ which frequently populate RPGs) in addition to the ‘core’ gameplay challenges. Some of these may be unenjoyable, existing alongside more enjoyable ones, yet are often necessary not only for unlocking another part of the game but for the realisation of the player’s self-set goals, which may involve obtaining a piece of equipment or an achievement, which are seldom strictly required to complete the game. These could be cynically interpreted to be features that extend the lifespan of the game, or the time it takes to play through it from beginning to end, for the purposes of justifying the game’s

Despite the emphasis on player freedoms, it is not the case that there is no ‘gameplay condition’ or invariant structure (Leino, 2010, p.101) in non-linear games with complex or emergent structures.
price label. The mini-games are frequently an invitation to play for a reward that will have an impact on the core game itself, such as the eventual acquisition of a powerful weapon. Where the player is motivated to only play them for such a reason, there is anticipation and deferral at work. Indeed, this structure is prevalent among many games across different genres but especially so in RPGs insofar as they can be said to be genre of repetitive ‘grinding’ for the sake of levelling up and unlocking aspects of the game that the player would like to access. The self-set nature of this deferral is particularly interesting with respect to the ambivalence between neoliberal self-fashioning and aesthetic self-transformation.

For the purposes of highlighting the relationship between what is strictly required by the game and what is set by the player as a goal, it is instructive to turn to the work of Olli Leino (2010, p.153), who has identified three modes of solitary play with regard to the involvement of the game artefact and the imposition of the ‘gameplay condition’ (the rule-bound conditions of possibility shared by all players of the same game):

*mere playing* (as in a child’s freeform play), *playing with* a single-player computer game (as in freeform play involving a single-player computer game), and *playing a single-player computer game*. The first activity is not delineated by a gameplay condition. The second may be, but this condition is not, however, enforced anywhere else but in the player’s mind. In the first and second cases, playing is a project like any other project one might take on, and can be thus reshaped and restructured at will. The last of the activities is delineated by the gameplay condition and the condition is enforced by the materiality of the game artefact (ibid.).

What is of interest here are the boundaries between the second and third kind of case, between the more freeform playing with a computer game, and playing it. Leino states that the second kind of case is enforced only in the player’s mind. This is further elaborated upon through Leino’s (2002, pp.11-14) explanation of Costikyan’s distinction between ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit goals’. *SimCity* (Maxis, 1989), for Costikyan (2002, p.13), contains no explicit goals, which may be described as the ‘victory conditions’ that terminate gameplay upon being met, but instead ‘allows players to choose their own
goals’ and is amenable to so many goal-directed behaviours. Leino (2010, p.139) adds that if one were to strive towards one’s own goal, an example being that of attempting to replicate a real-life neighbourhood representationally in the game, this endeavour can fail in one of two ways: by not resembling its counterpart, or by causing the player to run out of resources during the construction, thus being unable to complete it. Only a failure of the second kind leads to the end of play, since it means that the gameplay condition, or the goals encoded into the game’s materiality, have no longer been fulfilled. This is not to say, however, that failure to meet the so-called implicit goals will not result in the termination of play; a player may be so upset that the neighbourhood is not a good likeness that they load back to the moment when they began its construction, but it is not a termination that is enforced by the game. But this kind of distinction, between the material demands of the game and the psychology of the player, finds a clear trajectory in the study of games and play; Caillois (2001 [1958], cited in Leino, 2010, p.66), for example, had articulated the difference between the ‘purely formal qualities’ and the ‘various psychological attitudes that govern play’.

The boundaries between the second and third kind of case described above concerns the zone in which the materiality of the game artefact has repercussions for the apparently idiosyncratic playing with that takes place without necessitating it in order for play to continue. It may be asked whether the materiality takes the form of a ‘rationality’ that exerts a gravitational pull towards a particular trajectory on all players, or whether its effects are diffuse and varied. If the former, do elements of the game reinforce or tease out, for example, a neoliberal rationality? If the latter, can we nevertheless detect an underlying homogeneity amongst the diffuse trajectories? Thus, I favour not the sober, detached analyses in terms of what is possible or needed, and what is not, when there is discontinuation and when there is continuation, on the basis of the ontologically rigid ‘materiality’ of the game, but the analyses in terms of the conjunction between power and the subject, or rather the interactions between the structures of the game and the player’s disposition, to result in certain player practices. It is not to say that the former kinds of analyses are mistaken, but only that there is much pertaining to the ‘rationality’ of the games in question that they may miss.

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139 Alison Gazzard (2013) has also noted that players may chase their own ‘personal rewards’.
Levelling up in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*

With this in mind, I turn to *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006), in which the intricacies of the levelling up system can lead to a variety of player approaches that can be better understood through the lens of the aims that the player sets themselves rather than what is required in order to progress the game. As such, the relationship of the game’s rules to player actions is far from a deterministically disciplinary one that penalises the slightest nonconformist behaviour. The ways in which players construct their own objectives is of course informed by the parameters of the game, but the player is made to feel that there is an element of their own individuality in the manner in which they steer a particular course between meeting the basic demands and delving into the realms of min-maxing. Insofar as the difficulty setting can be adjusted to such a low level that it becomes almost inconceivable for even the most bumbling of players to be defeated by the daedra, undead, or brigands that they encounter; what is arguably more important than seeing the game as offering a series of challenges to be overcome is to see it as proposing a labyrinth of disparate opportunities for players to find a path that they feel is meaningful for them. In this sense, players’ own self-set goals are the means by which short-term, as well as longer-term objectives that structure the experience of gameplay are set. Players’ assessments of how well or poorly they meet those goals, and their difficulty, provide much of the aporiae and epiphanies that constitute the playing of the game.

The level-up system forms perhaps the central consideration to any plans that a player sets for their self-set character development, being the means by which the player can exert control over the possible interactions with the game world, with hostile as well as friendly NPCs. It will be helpful here to give a brief outline of the slightly Byzantium structure of *Oblivion’s* levelling system. At the outset of the game, as players create a custom character for themselves (there is also the option of picking a pre-set one), which they will pilot through the game in the quest to save Tamriel from the dreaded Mehrunes Dagon, they have to make two key decisions that impact upon the criteria which govern character levelling-up. First, they have to decide on one ‘Specialization’ out of ‘Combat’, ‘Magic’ and ‘Stealth’. Second, they have to decide on seven ‘Major Skills’ out of the full list of twenty-one possible ‘Skills’ (see the first column of Table 1), with the rest becoming ‘Minor Skills’. Level-ups are achieved by levelling up any combination of these Major Skills so that they total an increase of ten. The ones I
picked in my playthrough were: Armorer, Blade, Blunt, Hand to hand, Alchemy, Marksman, and Speechcraft. So if I had just levelled, and they were all at level 50, and I levelled Blade by a further five and Armorer by five, my character will have gained another level. As with almost all RPGs, Skills are levelled by using them repeatedly, with the ‘experience’ yielded by an action, such as hitting a target with a bladed weapon (Blade) being a set quantity, and the amount of experience required to reach the next level of Blade increases in line with the level attained. All Skills are divided into one of three ‘Specializations’, which, as stated, are Combat, Magic and Stealth. Under Combat falls: Armorer, Athletics, Blade, Block, Blunt, Hand to Hand and Heavy Armor; Magic governs: Alchemy, Alteration, Conjuration, Destruction, Illusion, Mysticism and Restoration; whilst Stealth covers: Acrobatics, Light Armor, Marksman, Mercantile, Security, Sneak and Speechcraft. Major Skills improve more quickly than do Minor Skills, as do Skills that fall under the character’s chosen Specialization.140

It should by now be clear that the choice of Major Skills determines the ease and speed with which one levels up, relative to the Skills being used. Characters gain bonuses to their Health (10% of their Endurance) at each level-up, along with three Attribute increases (up to +5 for each) and the opportunity to use equipment or pursue quests with certain level requirements.141 It is the manner by which Attributes increase that is of particular interest here. Each Skill corresponds with an Attribute (as shown in Table 1), and there are a total of eight Attributes. Armorer, for example, is governed by Endurance (End), whilst Blade is governed by Strength (Str). An Attribute increase of +5 in three distinct Attributes can be obtained only if a mix of Skills corresponding to that Attribute has been levelled by double that number, i.e., by ten, at the moment of level-up, calculated in comparison to the numbers at the point of the previous level-up. For instance, Endurance can be raised by +5 if, during the course of a single level-up, the player had increased Armorer by two, Block by six, and Heavy Armor by two.

140 For Major Skills, only 60% of the base experience is needed when compared to a minor skill. For example, six casts of a fireball spell against an enemy, with Destruction as a Major Skill, will yield as much experience as ten casts if Destruction were a Minor Skill. Skills that fall under the Specialization of the class (Combat, Magic, or Stealth) also level faster, needing only 75% of the base experience. If a skill is both a Specialization and a Major Skill, it will require only 45% of the base experience.

141 Instead of a +5 in an Attribute, it is possible to opt for a +1 in Luck, which, although technically an Attribute, is particularly powerful in that a Skill is increased by 40% of however many points of Luck a character has over 50; e.g., for a Luck of 60, influenced skills are increased by 4 (40% of 10). Consequently, some efficient-levelling players may choose the Luck route, getting +5, +5, +1 to Attributes rather than three +5 increases. For the sake of simplicity, I have omitted this possibility from further discussions.
which altogether add to a total of ten points. Two other Attributes, say Strength (Str) and Intelligence (Int), could also have been raised in a similar way at that level-up. It is difficult to generalise about what Attributes do. Some work as resources that the player can draw upon – a higher Fatigue pool, which is used in actions of physical combat, and a higher Magicka pool, which is used in spellcasting, are made available when the Attributes of Endurance and Intelligence are raised, respectively. Attributes can also enhance the damage of ranged weapons (Agility) or increase the rate of Magicka regeneration (Willpower).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Att</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Exp./Action</th>
<th>Total Actions (Base)</th>
<th>Total Actions (Spec)</th>
<th>Total Actions (S+M)</th>
<th>Training Tip</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Combat Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armororer</td>
<td>End</td>
<td>each use of a repair hammer</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>6,812</td>
<td>5,109</td>
<td>4,088</td>
<td>3,066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletics</td>
<td>Spd</td>
<td>time (secs) spent running</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>94.6 hrs</td>
<td>70.5 hrs</td>
<td>56.4 hrs</td>
<td>42.6 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>time (secs) spent swimming</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>70.9 hrs</td>
<td>53.2 hrs</td>
<td>42.6 hrs</td>
<td>31.9 hrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blade</td>
<td>Str</td>
<td>each hit on a target</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>20,435</td>
<td>15,327</td>
<td>12,261</td>
<td>9,196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Block</td>
<td>End</td>
<td>each blocked hit</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>8,174</td>
<td>6,131</td>
<td>4,905</td>
<td>3,679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blunt</td>
<td>Str</td>
<td>each hit on a target</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>20,435</td>
<td>15,327</td>
<td>12,261</td>
<td>9,196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hand to Hand</td>
<td>Str</td>
<td>each hit on a target</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>17,030</td>
<td>12,773</td>
<td>10,218</td>
<td>7,664</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy Armor</td>
<td>End</td>
<td>each hit taken</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>8,174</td>
<td>6,131</td>
<td>4,905</td>
<td>3,679</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Magic Skills                                     |     |                                 |             |                      |                      |                     |                                                   |
| Alchemy   | Int | each potion created             | 5.0         | 2,044                | 1,533                | 1,227               | 920                 | Create Restore Fatigue potions, Farms can provide an abundance of ingredients for this. |
|           |     | each ingredient eaten           | 0.5         | 20,435               | 15,327               | 12,261              | 9,196               |                                                   |
| Alteration| Wil | each spell cast with a valid target | 4.0     | 2,555                | 1,917                | 1,533               | 1,150               | Create a custom Shield spell (3 points, 1 second) (or use Protect) and cast repeatedly.* |
| Conjuration| Int | each spell cast with a valid target | 6.0     | 1,703                | 1,278                | 1,022               | 767                 | Create a custom Summon Skeleton spell with a duration of 1 sec and cast repeatedly or cast Summon Skeleton and use Turn undead on the skeleton repeatedly.* |
| Destruction| Wil | each spell cast with a valid target | 1.2     | 8,514                | 6,386                | 5,109               | 3,832               | Create a custom Weakness to Element on self (3 points, 1 second) repeatedly or use Entropic touch on a valid target repeatedly.* |
| Illusion  | Per | each spell cast with a valid target | 5.0     | 3,406                | 2,555                | 2,044               | 1,533               | Create a custom Light spell (3 points, 1 second) (or use Starlight) and cast repeatedly.* |
**Table 1: Acquiring experience points.**


This table specifies which Actions are necessary to gain experience in each skill, and how many experience points are gained each time the action is done (Exp./Action). Under Total Actions the table provides the total number of actions necessary to train a skill from a level of 5 to 100 (assuming the skill is not a major skill or specialization skill). A few skills provide times in hours; in all cases, these are hours of real time. Training Tip provides a single suggestion for how to train this skill effectively for each action that trains the skill.
Although the game itself says very little about these hidden operations, with the manual containing only limited information, numerous Oblivion forums are devoted to its explanation. This is in many ways unsurprising, since character ‘effectiveness’ can be plotted out from character level, and the levels of a character’s Attributes, ‘Derived Attributes’ (Health, Magicka, Fatigue, Encumbrance – all of which are directly dictated by the relevant Attributes), and Skills. Crucially, in order to consistently hit three +5 Attribute increases per level, a considerable amount of forward planning is required, which calls for a precise balancing of actions employed, from the number of blows struck with a bladed weapon, to healing potions brewed or locks picked. Almost every conceivable in-game action that the player is capable of performing contributes in some way to the increase of a Skill; simply walking around raises Athletics. For the player who is watchful of these increases, ‘over-leveling’ Skills leads to what would be perceived as waste, since an Attribute could not be improved beyond +5 each level – even if their governing Skills had gone up by more than ten. Any amount more than ten could potentially impact upon future levelling: if all the Skills relating to Endurance, for example, had been levelled to 100 – the maximum – then Endurance could not be raised at the next level-up since there could no longer be a ten point increase in the governing Skills.

Given the difficulty of maximising Attributes and the non-necessity of doing so, the endeavour to do so is comparable to the process of hunting after game achievements or trophies that are only available to those who have gone through some arduous labour. The impetus that comes from us, as I have discussed in chapter two, is not only with respect to the analytical learning cycle, to understanding the operations at work, but to the achievement of particular goals. It goes without saying that some players will have given no thought whatsoever to these mechanics, and simply played the game as it suited them. Indeed, it is quite crucial for our purposes that such players could complete the game, and could, especially if they had suitable combat strategies, hold their own at the higher difficulty levels. It is not the case that there is only one kind of player implied by the game, and that is the one who meticulously plots out what is to be done at every level. A good proportion of players, however, may have given varying degrees of thought to which Skills to level and when, and perhaps even to restart from the point where they picked their Major Skills so as to better control when level-ups occur. Choosing Blade as a Major Skill, and playing through the game with a bladed weapon gives the player little control over the rate at which Blade increases, since it will
depend upon the rate of enemies at points in the game. The player will need to use their Blade Major Skill in order to survive and to continue playing the game. As such, it is likely that by the time the player’s Major Skills (including Blade) have increased by ten (causing a level-up), they will not have levelled up other Skills to give two other Attribute increases of +5. A player who wants to level-up with optimal effectiveness will need to, rather paradoxically, pick Major Skills that they can refrain from using until such time that they are ready to level-up. Repeatedly casting Conjuration spells or continuously moving whilst undetected (Sneak) around a sleeping NPC are appropriate picks for Major Skills, assuming that there is no necessity to employ them when the player does not desire to do so. Each cast of a Conjuration spell contributes to raising Conjuration, unlike Destruction spells, for which there must be a valid enemy target; and sneaking around sleeping NPCs automatically passes their detection checks, however low one’s Sneak may be. Thus, by placing these levelling considerations at the forefront of one’s mind, Oblivion can quickly seem like a chore, like a form of laborious work rather than play. At the very least, it is a particular kind of deferred gratification that involves a calculated deliberateness and control. In order to alleviate the requisite tracking, players have created such aids as the ‘skill diary mod’ to offer assistance. Its function is to ‘allow players to track how much each of their skills has levelled up since the last time they gained a level. From this information it is possible to determine better which skills to focus on in order to get the desired attribute multipliers for each level’ (Nexusmods Oblivion, 2008).

**Player typologies**

It is work-like or laborious play, however, that is pursued with numerous possible concrete goals in mind. Here, I have envisaged various conceivable ways of playing through the game based on a variety of factors: my own playthroughs of the game, observing and hearing about the play of others, my estimation of the presumed players

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142 For the purposes of the work/play distinction, it should not be neglected that the ‘theorycrafting’ component, or the detailed mathematical analysis of game mechanics, such as damage calculation, intersects with aspects of sociability and community recognition, and can also potentially be considered to be ‘play’, or part of playing the game for some. This also opens up to a wider discussion about the forms of sociality perpetuated through dialogue with other players grappling to find their own way through the game.
for such an RPG, and consulting a variety of sources, including: online guides, forums, and the *Elder Scrolls IV: Official Strategy Guide* by Peter Olafson (2006).\(^\text{143}\) No direct lines can be drawn between specific pieces of information from any particular sources, and the typologies that have been formulated; as I have mentioned in the previous chapter, the formulation of these interpreter typologies is not to be done in accordance with a systematic framework. The information that the sources individually convey has been agglomerated into an overall holistic understanding.

Given that the six typologies that have been formulated arise from my conception of the presumed players for such an RPG, what have not been foregrounded are niche categories of players characterised by highly specific kinds of relationships to the game. I have also implicitly excluded from consideration those players who have not comprehended the game or who have failed to extract the sensations from it to motivate further play, which may account for a not insignificant proportion of the total who have tried the game. Players who use cheats to level-up have also been excluded, mainly out of consideration that a considerable number of players played the game on consoles, which placed not insignificant obstacles on such

143 There is a heavy emphasis on efficient levelling or optimisation strategies within these sources. Such texts, for Gee (2003, p.97), can be very much understood as texts that are integrated into the ‘appreciated systems’ of players, or the means by which they judge what is worthwhile play. Looking at the sources alone would not be sufficient to gauge a range of player typologies; they would skew the interpreter’s formulation of typologies if they were not situated within a broader understanding of the ways in which contemporary RPG players are likely to play the game and fall short of, or compromise on those ideal strategies. The entries on the Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages (UESP) are written with the assumption that players already have certain goals when it comes to playing the game. Even the UESP (2016a) entry on ‘levelling’ contains recommendations about how to level efficiently. It is not merely an impartial description of the mechanics insofar as it also features advice and recommendations, although they are conveyed in a way that suggests multiple approaches and so leaves the degree of conformity open to the player. Efficient levelling has its own section of course (see: UESP, 2016b); and refraining from levelling also boasts a substantial section (see: UESP, 2016c), since it is the approach that involves the player wilfully choosing not to play parts of the game, and it is presumed that players will seek guidance on deciding whether what has been given up was worthwhile (the guide advises that 185 of the 199 completeable quests in the game can be done at level one). The IGN guide (2012) to *Oblivion* also discusses efficient levelling, whilst various Gamefaqs forums (2016b; 2016c) similarly concern themselves with that approach to the game, with Gamefaqs (2016c) plumbing the issue of how to strike a balance between efficient levelling and ‘actually enjoying the game’. The emphasis on efficient levelling must be considered as a standard that is likely to be known to players, and which will influence their play, but it should not be assumed that a majority of them will play with it as their overarching goal.
cheating. Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly a sense in which, as we will see, my typologies aim at a kind of exhaustiveness; they run the whole gamut from players aiming at optimising their character's levelling to those that do not take the levelling system into consideration at all. The most pertinent issue for any further empirical verification of the typologies therefore, at least in the present case, is perhaps not so much whether there is adequate coverage of various player engagements, as mentioned in the previous chapter (though this is not ruled out as a possibility), as it is the validity of the respective weighting or attention given to certain typologies that may be argued to be in fact more marginal – the second of the aims of empirical testing described in the previous chapter.

The actual designer typologies have evidently not been employed. The present interpreter-made typologies – my own – notably go beyond Aarseth's concern with the player who plays only to do well in the game; they attempt to encompass a wider range of relevant considerations. Nevertheless, I assume that the 'moral code' that is operative, as discussed in the previous chapter, is, at least in some loose sense, an approach to levelling in which one takes the opportunity to do well, to attempt to realise one's character's potential, and to take an attitude to the game that considers it to be a challenge. As we will see, the way in which this challenge is responded to can vary considerably between typologies. In this way, the moral code itself does not determine the various typologies, but exerts a pull on player action that takes different forms, with players finding myriad ways for the game to challenge them.

Now, I move onto the typologies themselves. One possible scenario involves the player who is after the 'feel' of how *Oblivion* plays once they have maxed out all Attributes (excluding Luck) at level 25, knowing that since enemies scale and level-up with the player, efficiently levelling to level 25 and then stopping means that they have reached a peak of in-game effectiveness. This is the player who maximises their character relative to all other NPCs. Daedra and goblins are easier to fry with lightning bolts, peaceful townsfolk more susceptible to being deceived with illusions, and merchants more readily manipulated with silvered tongue, and so on. A second is where a player, knowing the difficulties associated with efficient levelling, aims to give themselves some leeway and reach maximum Attributes by, for example, level 30. This is a less extreme version of the first player type, but there may be some other considerations at work: perhaps wanting to face comparatively tougher opponents than
would have been the case at 25, and wanting to face enemies that appear only after level 25 (such as the liche).

A third possibility is the player who simply wants to reach the highest level possible, by reaching 100 in all their Skills. This will be somewhere between level 46 and 50, and is likely to take a considerable amount of time, perhaps some ninety hours of play or more. The higher number of levels at stake means that there is quite ample opportunity to maximise one’s Attributes, so there can be a certain latitude with respect to their levelling. Achieving the highest level possible is a goal that can be taken a step further given that going to prison in the game decreases the character’s Skills, allowing them to be levelled up again (resulting in additional level-ups); this allows for the circumvention of the natural cap placed on the maximum level. As such, the pursuit of this goal could result in the player repeatedly going to prison, perhaps because they want to face the strongest enemies possible. This fourth player type is characterised, then by wanting to experiment with attaining the highest level possible without any regard for effectiveness, but to explore what is possible within the system of the game.

There is also another type of player who refuses the standard levelling-up terms of the game – the fifth type for our purposes. It is in fact possible for the player to play the entire course of the game without levelling-up at all. Not only can the player spend endless hours roaming through Tamriel, it is possible to defeat Mankor Camaron and Mehrunes Dagon, saving the world from the daedric threat, as a humble level one adventurer. Since sleeping is required to actually trigger the process of levelling-up once the criteria have been met, not sleeping defers this trigger. Further, given that enemy levels scale with the player, the player should still be quite capable of defeating level one opponents through the whole game. The game is not necessarily made any harder via this approach, and as such loses the appeal of being a difficult challenge to be pursued, which would no doubt have attracted the kind of players who prefer to play a game under the most difficult circumstances.\footnote{One of the compulsory quests requires the player to obtain a daedric artefact (Blood of the Daedra), of which there are fifteen. Only one of them is exempt from a level requirement higher than one – the Masque of Clavicus Vile. Thus, to play through without levelling-up, the player will have to discover this fact.} It is an approach to the game that misses much of what it has to offer – in terms of playing with new character abilities and having to respond to those of enemies, as well as missing out on various level-
dependent and sleep-dependent quests – but it is a way of playing it nonetheless.\textsuperscript{145} And finally, a sixth kind of player is the one who only has an extremely vague idea of how the levelling works, and plays the game with it having a negligible impact on the Skills that they pick or the in-game training they pursue.

![Fig. 1: Levelling-up, Attribute increases, and a motivational message](image)

**Ambivalent asceses**

In these possibilities, it would be reductive, given the complexity of the contextual factors, to hold that the pre-eminent motivation can be encapsulated by ‘optimisation.’ However, it may also be unwarranted to pre-emptively dismiss the view that these goals can all be encompassed in some form under a pervasive ‘world-reason’. In terms of Dardot and Laval’s analysis of neoliberalism, the first approach is perhaps the most outrightly ‘competitive’; the second is more pragmatic – a higher ‘return’ is sacrificed for a reduction of effort, and may evidence a mindset that is accustomed to balancing ‘work’ with leisure; the third may not be about ‘doing well’ or playing well’ in the same way that the first approach was, but is still geared towards a different kind of competitiveness. The fourth and fifth approaches seem to pivot on exploring boundaries for the sake of doing so: the highest level possible; and how far one can get

\textsuperscript{145} If the ‘keyholes’ of the game are thought to be opened by playing through it, in its entirety, rather than levelling up, then such a player has experienced the game.
as a level one character. They shade into a kind of curiosity that desires to push limits and perhaps bode the most promise, but may similarly, on a less charitable interpretation, be indicative of the sort of entrepreneurial innovation that thinks within broadly the same parameters. The sixth seemingly steers clear of the levelling system altogether, and it does not even constitute something like the fifth’s explicit refusal of that system which is nevertheless a direct response to its terms.

For the first kind of player, precision-levelling is crucial. The player has to keep accurate track of all their Skills, planning which three to level by ten points, whilst trying to refrain from levelling the other Skills in order to save them for levelling use later on. Without using a skill diary mod, the player will have to keep a notebook of some kind to keep a running tally that is then constantly updated or else the memorisation required would be extensive. This player will also have to engineer scenarios in which levelling-up can be accurately tracked, such as repeatedly picking locks to raise Lockpicking until a set target – perhaps having to speed-run through a planned gauntlet of dungeons only looking for chests to be picked. They are the closest type to the classic ‘power gamer’, and are willing to go to great lengths to achieve the desired result with no room for deviation allowed. A great deal of temperance (sophrosune) is required for Oblivion to be played in this way, and parallels can be drawn between ancient ascetic practices and the self-discipline required, particularly with regard to abstaining from what would come more easily. However, the careful tallying and self-moderation here are not with a view to developing a reflective attitude or a mindfulness of the future, as it was with the

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146 These last two (arguably) transgressive forms of playing Oblivion have been employed as player placeholders, as categories with which we can understand a not insignificant form of player practice – there are numerous discussions of these approaches to be found on online forums (see: Gamefaqs, 2016a). In the previous chapter, I had argued against the emphasis on transgressive players; here, however, the forms of transgressive play discussed do not work to negate

147 To be good at Lockpicking, a player needs a good steady hand and some surgical precision when it comes to tapping the tumblers. They will also need to remember the rhythm of each tumbler on hard locks as they will almost certainly take more than one pick, and each failure sets the player back to the first tumbler.

148 As I have mentioned, it would be short-sighted to resort only to a straightforward comparison between either gamers’ practices, or implied game practices, and these ancient practices as mentioned by Foucault, since it would unduly ossify the ancient practices and disregard saliently different historical contexts. However, I have also stated that Foucault relied on being indeed something valuable in the ancient practices, perhaps more so than their historical distance from us, and which I sought to connect to notions of an embodied rationality.

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keeping of the hypomnemata, but merely to keep track so that a particular end can be achieved.

It is possible, however, that the optimised levelling-up is done not in order to be effective, but to be precise and to be faithful to a ‘truth’, to play the game ‘ethically’ on the terms that the player believes has been set out for them. This can be understood as effectively a sacrifice of how one would want to play in an unhindered way in favour of how one feels one ought to play in order for the game to more fully ‘reveal’ itself. It is a similar motivation to those players who insist on playing games at higher difficulty settings – so that the challenges of the game are brought out and they are faced with puzzling out how to respond to them; easier difficulties are so tolerant of mistakes that even strategies unsuitable for certain situations do not result in failure. Thus, if every gamic challenge is successfully completed whichever way the player goes about it, the player cannot embark on the learning feedback loops that enable them to mentally map the game and to experience the aesthetics it has to offer. In this sense, to be true or faithful to the game requires one to seek out its challenges, and to play through it to the best of one’s ability. With Oblivion, it is far from clear that the ramifications of its levelling system were intentional, or help the game express something of value, but this may or may not dissuade a player committed to being faithful to the game, which is an approach that supervenes on adherence to the ‘moral code’ and so constitutes a subject’s distinctive relation to ‘truth’, or to oneself.

There can be found instances of the Stoic distancing that requires ‘breaking with what comes easily or naturally’ in this style of play, given its involving taking circuitous routes: there might be a section in a game where the player has to train a low Blade Skill in order to keep to the levelling plan, even though a few Destruction spells would easily dispatch the opponents; or a few levels where the player wants to refrain from using Restoration spells in order to level-up their Alchemy, by brewing healing potions in preparation for fights, and which then leads to a search for the requisite herbs. Planning and action are tightly interwoven, and the resulting problems and opportunities are significantly informed by the player’s own goals and the problematics that they see as arising from those goals – we can recall here the ethopoetic relation to the truth that is read in the weft of accomplished actions. For example, cheap herbs are perhaps best obtained in large quantities from vendors (rather than hand-picked one by one), though some vendors only become available after certain quests are completed or events have transpired, so the healing potion task can thereby become a how-to-unlock-the-vendor
task, which in turn may lead to yet something else. The connection of the tasks to each other in this domino effect is eventually adumbrated on the basis of the player’s relation to the goals that permeate each of the tasks.

Thus, although there is a prominent calculative dimension to efficient-levering, this aspect of encountering problematics that have been generated by one’s own approach, though undoubtedly instrumental, is not easily subsumed under the description of ‘thinking like a computer’. It is perhaps in these strange moments, where we have seemingly abided by the game’s terms most stringently, that we break from the fiction of the game most powerfully, likely still in the midst of a flow-like experience. Further, it is through this fidelity to the game that we have perhaps wandered the most from the game as it was meant to be played, yet become attuned to a deeper logic or rationality that pervades it. Being ‘true’ to the game in this way is to have, paradoxically, allowed oneself to be seemingly overridden by calculative and competitive concerns.\footnote{Kirkpatrick (2015) has remarked, on this point, that we turn play into something laborious in order to escape what has been mapped for us for fear of manipulation. The player’s wanting to be true to the game evokes the situation described by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, p.460), in which the ‘contradiction between the exigency of manipulation and the demand for authenticity…creeps into the very core of the person…we can thus foresee an increase in paranoid behaviour by people who are forever fearful that they have been manipulated, plagiarised or hi-jacked’.}

This kind of intensity in the approach to learning how things work comports with the ancient concern of ‘being ready for the world,’ in which one is transformed and sheds those parts of oneself that make one ill-equipped for dealing with the obstacles and difficulties. It is a deeply practical attitude that is connected to living in agreement with nature, and to practicing situations that the subject may have to confront.

If this first kind of player is a Weberian ‘ideal type’, the second kind of player encompasses a spectrum of players who have contemplated optimal levelling, and whose motivations and behaviour are influenced but not dictated by it. Their reasons for falling short will offer comparatively more complexity than the singular and unconditional dedication of the first player type. In particular, they are willing to trade off faithful adherence for some moments of ‘spontaneity,’ or to do what is immediately easiest, and have a layered sense of, the costs and effort of not only actions, but commitments to modes of being.

The third kind of player is a completionist achievement seeker. The challenge they have set themselves is not to be the most comparatively powerful character in Tamriel, but to have unlocked the most of the possibilities offered in game; one’s
character is the most accomplished mage, warrior, and rogue possible. Rather than precision, or correct ordering, there is persistence. This is accentuated to such an extent in the case of the fourth player type that they seek to challenge the boundaries of the game, seeing at what point, if any, going to prison no longer decreases one’s levels. Insofar as they exemplify power gaming, neither of these approaches, nor that of the first player type’s are necessarily the apothecoses of an entrepreneurial neoliberal rationality. Silverman and Simon (2009, p.358) see power gaming, which is normally defined in RPGs as reaching the highest level possible with the most effective class and build, ‘as a form of playing at working that ultimately produces kinds of subjects that do not necessarily make for the best workers’. In fact, power-gamers are only role-playing an ideal form of rational-economic player character, or ‘playing at working,’ which means that their actions are more appositely read as ‘a critique of hyperrationalized post-industrial work rather than an instantiation of it’ (ibid., p.375). 150 There is also a latent critique within power gaming in that the absurdities or incoherencies in games are more readily revealed through power-gaming practices. The ideal gamer (ideal for the gaming industries) is in fact a ‘casual gamer’ who purchases the game but does not make incessant or laborious demands for the product to be changed (Silverman & Simon, 2009, p.374). However, rather than foregrounding which activities generate (economic) value, the approach taken in this thesis requires asking which practices of the self are entailed by or connected to completionism and power-gaming, which shifts the question from one of direct economic value generated to the more indirect economic facilitation of relations to self that may be suitable to post-industrial work. These completionist typologies are defined by sheer persistence and the number of hours spent in the game, checking off a list of things to be done, and which often entails everything that it is possible to do in a game.

With regard to the fifth player type, although it is possible for a player to not level up due to missing the gamic cues and instructions that sleeping is required to level up – to unintentionally play the whole game without levelling up – this is rather difficult if one is paying even a modicum of attention. It is far more likely that the player has intentionally not levelled, perhaps conducting some kind of experiment on a subsequent playthrough to see how far it is possible to get without levelling. In this case, the tentative exploration of this possibility likely belongs to a player already with an astute

150 Thus, ‘power gaming is a simulacrum of post-industrial work not an instantiation of it’, and in fact ‘short-circuits the composition of forces it derives from’, giving rise to a gaming subject ‘who would rather be playing at working than actually working’ (ibid.).
understanding of the calculative dimension of the game and its possibilities, even if the approach itself seems manifestly opposed to a competitive or efficiency-oriented neoliberal injunction.

There is arguably indeed a hint of transgressiveness about the maximisation of one’s level through exploiting the prison mechanic that had no doubt been intended as a disincentive (the fourth player type), or the refusal to level at all, as a deviation from the ‘moral code’ (the fifth player type). The transgressiveness, however, does not seem to largely exist in the conceiving of the acts themselves, nor in their execution, but in the persistence of keeping the course with an objective and a style of playing – the instantiation of an alternative means of playing. In this way, the fourth and fifth player types do act as a foil for the others, demonstrating that another way of proceeding through the game is possible, and that what some avoid can be sought for by others.¹⁵¹

Is it possible then, that these forms of self-practices can initiate the crucial move, from the personal to the impersonal, described in chapter one? The sundering of the self requires regular work and practice, but perhaps it can be driven by initial motivations that are much more prosaic in form than the will to self-abnegation. That is to say, we might be compelled at the outset by the pleasure of fleeting distractions, but eventually wander towards that move beyond the self once we discover the possibility for ascetic patterns of action. Some of the mental states described in chapter two – internalising the logic of the programme, thinking like a computer, systems cognition – all appear to point to an extra-individualistic mode of cognition. The identification with a process can be aligned with a becoming one with an element of technoculture, a ‘super-instrumentality’ defined by the forms of intense play, where paradoxically, rather than feeling bound by instrumental concerns, there is the experience of a complete lack of circumscription on one’s decision-making. This seems to emerge most clearly in the case of the first player typology, given that efficient levelling calls for the careful planning and calibration of every in-game action in accordance with a pre-set plan. It is the players’ intense identification with the procedures themselves, which brings out the limitations of, among other things, designer intentions for the game as a designed artefact. This is arguably a form of being transgressive by taking things to their logical conclusion through a total compliance with the rationale of the system itself.

¹⁵¹ There are some commonalities with the so-called pacifist playthroughs, which are a well-established challenge with respect to games in which the easiest way to deal with enemies is by killing them. They are possible in some games where intuitively it would seem that they would not be.
However, there remains the question as to whether this feeling of the temporary loss of the self is comparable to the movement beyond the self as described in the ancient practices, particularly in the sense of the achievement of freedom and autonomy, or constitutes a tantalising mirage. There are difficulties with drawing parallels between it and the ancient practice of attempting to ‘plunge oneself into the world,’ for example. The feeling of belonging to a whole, which presumably comes from all the complexities arising from our existence as embodied social beings existing in the world, results from the harmonisation of an indescribable array of factors, of reaching an equilibrium point in relation to various antinomies and aporiae, including how we view our own mode of being but also have some awareness of the limitations of that view. In a computer game, if it is possible to mentally map the causal relations at work such that the player has an understanding of every possible occurrence, the simplicity of the game itself presents a tremendous problem for players to see beyond their ludic shell. There is simply insufficient complexity for our cognitive capacities to grapple with in a similar fashion, and with which to achieve a comparable mode of equilibrium, though there may well be the feeling of belonging to a whole. As we have seen, cognitively mapping the game has little bearing on our being able to cognitively map the world. Nevertheless, it is not so easy to completely dismiss the possibility that one’s harmonisation with a super-instrumentality does seem to amount to a form of wandering. There is a strange absurdity to it, to the insularity of the activities involved and to their almost ritualistic nature. In the next chapter, I take up the challenge that this presents to the view that the practices required for super-instrumental play are pernicious.

**Anticipation and deferral**

*Oblivion* presents a case where the player may come to the game already with certain aims, such as playing as a mage, wanting to play on the higher difficulty settings, and

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152 No doubt in some cases, computer games simply set themselves up to be mood regulators, to be the protean holy grail of commodities that shape themselves to be whatever their consumer desires, rather than effecting a move beyond the self or transformation of the self. Yet insofar as games may be able to offer the experience of the structure of ascetic work that provokes not only the player’s fidelity to it, but also a sense of recognition and reflection, perhaps they may yet catalyse a movement from personal to impersonal in the player’s *hexis* or mode of being.
desiring a continuous challenge from the game as they level-up. However, the game’s mechanics complicate this endeavour, and the player is faced with the prospect of starting over and choosing different Major Skills in the disciplines that they will not use if some of these goals come into conflict with others. One cannot easily play at the higher difficulty settings whilst playing as a mage with Major Skills set in offensive and defensive spells, given that one would be unable to level efficiently. This levelling mechanic does not prevent a player from playing *per se*, as a deficit of skill would do in the higher levels of *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo Research and Development 1, 1981) or *Tetris* (Atari Games, 1988), but it does present a dilemma to the player: to play with a ‘truthfulness’ to their understanding of the rationale of the game’s mechanics, on the basis of a ‘moral code’ that inhabits their perception of this kind of gameplay, or to play the game more instinctively, letting each moment occur without the dictates of an all-encompassing telos, or to seek a compromise.\footnote{This conflict between being ‘truthful’ to the game and playing it in the way one wants, sometimes in terms of the ‘truthfulness’ of the roleplaying, can come into conflict when the best reward for a quest requires one to pick the ‘good’ option or the ‘evil’ option in a way that contradicts the game character’s adopted ethos.} It is made especially pressing given the potential onerousness of the commitments involved.\footnote{Unusual here is the fact that the player most probably has to turn to an external source of information to supplement what they have inferred for themselves by engaging in mentally mapping the game. It is notably more obscure than in many games, in which the process of the learning process reveals the level-up mechanic more transparently.}

Given the disparate nature of the various typologies that have been posited, it is arguably difficult to deduce from them a clear set of commonalities, to draw together the concatenation of micro-reactions, or to generalise about the conjunction between the disposition of the players and the ‘rationalities’ in the game. The player’s actions and practices conform to their own impositions, constraints, and invented ways of efficiently accomplishing laborious tasks, within the possibilities that exist in the game. However, what seems to be most evidently shared is – insofar as one is influenced by the levelling mechanic – what could be rather neutrally described as the structure of ascetic deferral, the sacrifice of the moment, within the context of a calculative framework that bears on one’s character’s future state within the game. These calculations take place within an algorithmic system that has been mentally mapped by the player. The player’s patterns of action are repetitive and considered, and oriented towards the achievement of objectives that likely incline one to continue and gather momentum down a particular path that bears a relation to the ‘moral code’ upon which
the player has decided. The more that one is committed to the realisation of that trajectory, and the more affirmative feedback that is received from the game, the more entrenched one becomes within that mode of being in the game, and the less likely that there will be a subsequent deviation from it. What is at stake is one’s *hexis* with respect to anticipation and deferral, as it is progressively acquired and solidified.\(^\text{155}\)

This form of anticipation and deferral is true of the first to the third typologies, but also of the fourth, and perhaps even of the fifth, although the fifth has a much diminished calculative dimension due to the lack of need to count and track Skill advancement.\(^\text{156}\) The ‘rationality’ of the system itself, as an entity beyond that of designers’ intentions, animates this structure, and it does so in a way that meshes with an existing culture of ascetic gameplay practices, particularly in the genre of RPGs. I do not mean to suggest that this is something from which players cannot break loose, nor that it has to be viewed pejoratively – it will be analysed in further detail in the following chapter. However, what can be said here is that in *Oblivion*, the first, third, and fourth player types tried to conform to an ideal-image of the desired character build through patterns of action characterised by deferral and anticipation. The fifth did so by refraining from sleeping in the game. Levelling-up resonates with the work on the self, but it takes the form of graduated, marked and indicated progression that points to an ideal end that arbitrarily terminates at the level cap. As such, this falls short of what may be properly deemed as the aesthetic, in the sense that this image or end does not change, and is determinately produced by a set of initial considerations. It may change, however, when one fails to conform to the standard that one has set, or when one abandons a certain kind of relation to the ‘moral code’ in favour for another – this is best exemplified by the comparatively more complex relations to self and conditionals in the second player type, and by an experimental attitude that does not necessarily forego asceticism altogether.

If the pursuit of the ideal character build can be aligned with the search for an ‘authentic’ self, then this was something to which Foucault was opposed. His assuming that nothing in man was fundamental meant that the search is defined by a dogmatic appeal to standards that fix us to particular subjectivities, which close down our possible

\(^{155}\) This *hexis* may even come to be realised again as we approach other games that boast the same structural possibilities as *Oblivion*, with the disposition that has been nurtured by the play in this game.

\(^{156}\) The fourth and fifth so-called transgressive player-types most likely represent subsequent playthroughs, and so were arguably possible only on the basis of the other typologies.
modes of being rather than opening them up for alternative possibilities or foregrounding lines of fragility. It would typically involve the subject aiming at making themselves more efficient, more successful, more true to an ideal admired in discourse. In contrast, the aim of the full possession of oneself may be said to be much more open, though it too is not exempt from a fidelity to ‘truth’ that, in the most extreme interpretations, can even appear as a Kantian duty. Nevertheless, neoliberal self-fashioning leans towards the ambit of authenticity insofar as it channels our energies for work on the self into predefined categories that exist in discourse.

It should be noted that many games clearly do not feature this calculative structure of anticipation and deferral. Some games are, for example, much more about the mastery of a set of kinaesthetic skills and the knowledge and intuition to apply them in the appropriate situations. What has been described here is most appropriate to a form of ‘grinding’ that takes place in RPGs, with their typically clearly delineated levelling criteria and numerical systems. Yet it also clearly has applicability beyond just the genre of RPGs insofar as many games are understood by their players on a numerical level, and features the players making calculative decisions with regards to deferring various actions, or pursuing a pre-formed ideal of play that requires giving up what would most easily satisfy the immediate task at hand. Repetitive actions that cause an in-game advantage, as well as abstaining from using certain options, and planning how to complete tasks with more circuitous restrictions that are not strictly required, fits this structure well, and do extend beyond RPGs. The way in which I have suggested that the issue of applicability be further investigated, in any case, is via the analysis of ‘rationalities’ in other games for comparative purposes. This can only be accomplished with further work.

It may be that in order to secure our desires/goals as truly our own, it is better to attach them to a beyond-the-self that is in accordance with reason than let them be captured elsewhere (see: Han, 2002).

I also note a disclaimer that the dimension of levelling-up does not incorporate everything that there is about Oblivion as a computer game. It also prominently features, among other things, the exploration of a fictional fantasy world.

It is not too difficult to think of examples of instances of calculative anticipation and deferral in other genres outside of RPGs. To give one such example, in the RTS game Warhammer: Dark Omen (Mindscape & Games Workshop, 1998), the player may be led to pursue certain goals set by themselves that make the game much more laborious than would be the case to play with the mere aim of completion. In the game, set in the Warhammer fantasy world, the player progressively acquires a number of units over the course of the campaign, such as some mercenary ogres, or an ice wizard, which can be deployed in battle. Experience is acquired by units strictly through the number of
For some, the fact that neoliberalism is a mode of governmentality that acts on the conditions of actions, rather than curtailing the actions themselves, prompts the conclusion that the very act of making a choice in a game naturalises a neoliberal approach to decision-making in daily life (Baerg, 2009, p.119). This is a conclusion that I would like to avoid. It is not the case that neoliberal rationality is naturalised in Oblivion because all possible decisions for all possible players within that game fall under it; there is a tendency for certain forms of analysis to slip towards this ambitious claim. What has been posited here is the conjunction between only various player typologies or generalising constructs. There has been no attempt to have exhaustively assessed the conditions of possibility in the game, such that all patterns of action are catalogued, nor to have argued that such conditions, insofar as they may be calculative, are thereby aligned only with neoliberal rationality. To forget the constructedness of the player placeholder(s), which I have given in the form of the six player approaches, is to overreach.160

160 enemies that they have slain, and the experience worth of that enemy. Some units, such as the bright wizard with his devastating fire spells, are very good at accumulating kills, and can easily level up to maximum experience, after which any additional experience is lost. Other units are acquired late in the game, and do not have much opportunity to acquire experience, or are better at stalling enemy units than effectively defeating them. Therefore, in order for the player to try to evenly level all their units by the final mission so that they all achieve the maximum rank, which is a very reasonable aspiration to have, a great deal of strategic planning is required. The wood elf archers that arrive at a late stage can be quickly taken up from their starting rank of two to four by the bright wizard using the Crimson Bands spell to hold enemies in place so they are unable to engage the archers in melee or to flee, and are consequently shot to death. Many of the enemies on the last few missions need to be ‘fed’ to the archers (and a few other late units) in this way for the fourth rank to be achieved, and this is only possible if their attack is staggered, since the bright wizard can only root one unit in place at a time. The slow and ineffective Grudgebringer infantry, on the other hand, who are available right from the start, need to be manoeuvred into uncertain fights that the Grudgebringer cavalry could otherwise quickly and decisively win – the player must avoid the temptation to do this – if the infantry are to be levelled. There is little scope for them to gain experience once the wood elf archers have been obtained, so the player will need to consider which other missions they can best acquire large amounts of experience. These are some of the considerations faced by the player who is interested in more than simply completing the game; when the game is played in this way, battles take much longer and the coordination of the player’s strategy has to be extremely precise. The ideal image here, to which all of this is aimed, is that of distributing all the available experience to be had such that every unit reaches rank four.160 Given that levelling is only one dimension of a rather expansive game, and one that has a prominent dimension of exploration, the present analysis of player typologies will not, for example, reflect those who are drawn to sensory stimulus.
Without the complex conjunction between the kinds of ‘rationalities’ that could be said to lurk within the game, and the orientation and desires of the gaming subject conjunction, without the compound ways in which the latter interacts with the former, the point of the game and the openness of its invitation to types of play do not take on the character that they do, and the ways in which the game can work to reinforce or tease out certain player goals in order for gameplay to continue would not occur. It is because the player is likely to engage with the structures of anticipation and deferral that tremendous lengths of play-time are often involved in playing Oblivion. 161 The presumed player of the game, for the purposes of unlocking its effects, is not necessarily the one who pursues the optimisation strategy to levelling, which is merely one path through the labyrinth of the game, but encompasses all those players who set ‘appropriate’ targets for themselves and make that a central part of their gameplay, and who are influenced by the clues in the game in the ‘right way’ so that gameplay within particular parameters is fostered.

Yet it is only for this kind of player that the possibility of a wandering away or straying afield has ethico-aesthetic relevance. Otherwise, for a player who perceives the processual structure or logic of the game, such as levelling-up and eventually completing Oblivion, as absurd or alien, for whom there is a disjunction with the gamic cues, there is no possibility of such wandering. It is about coming to the game with the appropriate disposition but then having it changed by the game as a transformative work, and by ones own orientation to transformation. This entails the transformative game functioning in an obverse manner to the strategy of artistic shock, given that the effect of shock is likely to be realised on those who were most distanced from the message conveyed, those least likely to be in tune with its foundational premises and assumptions. With the computer game, the wandering away from the self is most pertinent for those who feel most ‘at home’ in playing it, and identify the most with its gamic cues by adopting the correct disposition.

To do this, one would have to register, through an analysis of the systematic concatenation of typologies, the elements of world-reason within the possibilities of the game as well as well as within one’s own concomitant desires. To wander away from oneself or to constitute oneself differently is to establish different forms of relationship

161 The base game itself, without counting any DLCs, takes about twenty-five hours to complete if one just plays the main quests, whilst doing all the quests available will take almost two-hundred hours (HowLongtoBeat, 2016). This will take longer still if some form of efficient levelling is pursued.
with oneself, to continually displace one’s subjectivity, and to ‘recognize oneself’ in certain ‘forms’ (Foucault 1992 [1984], p.4). It is, as Han’s (2002, p.164) reading of Foucault emphasises, a ‘reflective experience’ in which there is a ‘self-interpretive movement’ through which the subject understands their own nature (‘problematicisation’) but at the same time tries to comprehend the historical limits and games of truth that operate on this process of reflective ‘recognition’.\footnote{162 Foucault’s analysis of subjectivity oscillates between a definition in terms of a near autonomous ‘self-creation’, on the one hand, and the need to understand games of truth through which recognition operates, to go to the practices of power of which subjects are not masters, on the other (Han, 2002, p.172).} It is a transfiguration of the present through understanding our practices and how they can be different even within the contexts in which they take place. A player who has not given any thought to the levelling mechanics, and plays in ignorance of them, can surely avoid the suspicion that their play has been afflicted with calculative rationality. But such a player would not have been faced with an array of decisions concerning how to navigate the game, and so not engaged in the self-interpretive movement and grappling with the games of truth, which may be aligned with the extant broader rationalities that inflect the player’s relation to self in the game. The reflection involved is not in the form of thought divorced from action, but is realised in the actions themselves as part of a mode of being. In this way, the sixth player is, despite seeming to be the least susceptible to being overpowered by calculative rationality, the least equipped to embark on a wandering away from the self.

In any case, if the practices of the self involved in Oblivion can be thought to be subsumed under the practices and techniques of governmentality, then there is a question as to where the bounds of neoliberal rationality end and those of the pragmatic character of everyday life begin. The critique of neoliberalism, if it conceives its object to be too all-encompassing, risks leaving too small a space left for itself by vilifying an approach or attitude that arguably cannot be completely dispensed with – rationality per se – which should not be sacrificed in pursuit of an emancipatory politics, particularly the appeal to or deployment of reason that can be a tool for transformative practices. The tensions contained within Foucault’s characterisation of the ancient practices, particularly between pragmatism and adherence to a truth that may be transgressive, seems to offer a more sophisticated approach than much of the literature on neoliberalism, which has struggled with articulating it. Dardot and Laval do succeed in conveying some of the tensions of neoliberalism, but their emphases are resoundingly...
negative, and do not draw out any residual kernels of the care of the self that may subsist. They note the variety of oxymorons that have been deployed to express a state of self-imposed slavish adherence: ‘controlled autonomy’, ‘compulsory involvement’, and ‘voluntary servitude’, but they do not fully explain the ambivalence at work, or how the subject is induced into a form of self-transformation by fidelity to a ‘truth’ (2013, p.282). I develop a defence of rationality per se further in the next chapter, which will mark a further investigation into how to consider this ambivalence. It will be through recourse to Schiller, and his distinction between reason and the senses in his articulation of ‘play’, that the practices of the self, as leading to our refusing who we are, will be considered. The present chapter will conclude with some reflections about the climate of self-transformation that is built up by the game, which raises the question concerning the relationship between our transformation of the in-game situation and our transformation of ourselves.

The work on the gamic ‘self’

Although this thesis has largely considered computer games in terms of being processes and systemic structures that afford us the possibility of ascetic practices, it is of course their visual, auditory, and narrative dimensions that set a tone or mood that can be crucial to triggering our interest in becoming involved in such practices at the outset, as well as in maintaining our interest in them. The next section considers a few of the techniques employed in Oblivion, and then goes on to comment about the relationship between the work on one’s in-game character and the work on oneself.

The game fosters a particular kind of relationship between us as the players, and the in-game character. This is important insofar as our habituation to various RPG gaming conventions means that we have come to have a certain experience of the gamic mediation such that ‘taking care’ of our character’s advancement feels like an extension of, or substitute for, taking care of ourselves. In RPGs, the correspondence between the player and the avatar is of a sort that is different in kind to that in other genres where the player takes the role of a disembodied force that acts upon the game world through mainly nondiegetic operator acts. In cases where the player ‘inhabits’ an avatar, the

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163 Disembodiment is reminiscent of the experimental disintegration performed by Samuel Beckett, whose works had a profound influence on Foucault, and who claimed...
opportunity for confusion or conflation between what the player feels in response to events and what their in-game diegetic character is represented as feeling supplies a certain texture to the experience that does not have a corollary in cases where the player does not control an in-game avatar.\textsuperscript{164} Perhaps there are some \textit{prima facie} reasons for thinking that cases of the latter kind are in some ways more explorative. Some games evidently pursue closer identification between player and avatar through various ludic affordances that attempt to convey a great deal about the character’s particular subjectivity, the way in which they experience the world, and their abilities; this has been referred to as, following Genette (1980), the ‘focalization’ of the game (Allison, 2015). It is also possible, however, to not identify at all with one’s avatar, or to detach oneself from such a commitment. There is often a wilful conflation inculcated through the game design, in the way that the player is encouraged to name their character, to personalise him, her or it, and the technique in which the game uses the second-person personal pronoun ‘you’ to refer to the player and diegetic character, a conflation between the achievements and failures of the character and that of the player: gaining proficiency, overcoming adversity, saving the world. The transformative potential of playing the game, the potential for self-transformation rather than neoliberal self-fashioning, lies in the extent to which the player imposes their ‘everyday’ values and norms upon the gameplay. Maurice Blanchot (1982, p.198), whose work Foucault had admired as being able to facilitate a wandering away from the self, had remarked that ‘[w]hat most threatens reading is this: the reader’s reality, his personality, his immodesty, his stubborn insistence upon remaining himself in the face of what he reads’. This is a point that bears on RPGs, insofar as they may boast genre conventions that tend to lean more towards individuation than disarticulation, perhaps militates against this principle.

\textsuperscript{164} Commentators have written about how players not only identify with their avatar, but selectively adjust their identity to reflect that of their avatar (see: Klimmt, et al., 2009). Sicart (2009, p.78) conceives of describing certain gameplay experiences as a temporarily adopted virtual skin (via the game) ‘that is both ‘oneself’ and ‘other,’ because it has a component of strangeness that puts the player in contact with the virtual world’. The metaphor of the skin, he writes, ‘connects the internal, individual subjectivity of the player with the larger communitarian, cultural and historical subjectivities of the contemporary self’ (ibid., p.79).
With every level-up in *Oblivion* (Fig. 1), the player received a motivational message that is written in a form suggestive of it being their character’s own ruminations (Table 2): ‘[y]ou realize that all your life you have been coasting along as if you were in a dream…You resolve to continue pushing yourself…Today you wake up, full of energy and ideas’. These have no gamic repercussions, but bracket what could have been for the player, a period of planning and grind, setting a particular tone for the ensuing gameplay. Level-ups occur after meeting the Major Skills criteria followed by sleeping for any amount of time; these messages perhaps resemble the first thought that one has in the day, after getting out of bed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>You realize that all your life you have been coasting along as if you were in a dream. Suddenly, facing the trials of the last few days, you have come alive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>You realize that you are catching on to the secret of success. It’s just a matter of concentration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>You’ve done things the hard way. But without taking risks, taking responsibility for failure… how could you have understood?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Everything you do is just a bit easier, more instinctive, more satisfying. It is as though you had suddenly developed keen senses and instincts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>You’ve learned a lot about Cyrodiil… and about yourself. It’s hard to believe how ignorant you were, but now you have so much more to learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>You resolve to continue pushing yourself. Perhaps there’s more to you than you thought.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The secret does seem to be hard work, yes, but it’s also a kind of blind passion, an inspiration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>So that’s how it works. You plod along, putting one foot before the other, look up, and suddenly, there you are. Right where you wanted to be all along.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>You woke today with a new sense of purpose. You’re no longer afraid of failure. Failure is just an opportunity to learn something new.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Being smart doesn’t hurt. And a little luck now and then is nice. But the key is patience and hard work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>You can’t believe how easy it is. You just have to go… a little crazy. And then, suddenly, it all makes sense, and everything you do turns to gold.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>It’s the most amazing thing. Yesterday it was hard, and today it is easy. Just a good night’s sleep, and yesterday’s mysteries are today’s masteries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Today you wake up, full of energy and ideas, and you know, somehow, that overnight everything has changed. What a difference a day makes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Now you just stay at your peak as long as you can. There’s no one stronger in Tamriel, but there’s always someone younger… a new challenger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>You’ve been trying too hard, thinking too much. Relax. Trust your instincts. Just be yourself. Do the little things, and the big things take care of themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Life isn’t over. You can still get smarter, or cleverer, or more experienced, or meaner… but your body and soul just aren’t going to get any younger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>With the life you’ve been living, the punishment your body has taken… there are limits, and maybe you’ve reached them. Is this what it’s like to grow old?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>You’re really good. Maybe the best. And that’s why it’s so hard to get better. But you just keep trying, because that’s the way you are.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>By superhuman effort, you can avoid slipping backwards for a while. But one day, you’ll lose a step, or drop a heat, or miss a detail… and you’ll be gone forever.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21+</td>
<td>The results of hard work and dedication always look like luck. But you know you’ve earned every ounce of your success.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Vicariously realising things about yourself through a game character (level-up messages in *Oblivion*).

Contained in the style in which these messages have been written is the very ambivalence between the beneficial and pernicious practices of the self that have permeated our questioning of the structure of gameplay itself. There is a prominent rhetorics of aspiration at work, where the imperatives are self-realisation and the fulfilment of one's potential. If only one worked a bit harder, concentrated a little more, mustered an iota more resolve, had a greater sense of purpose, reflected longer on the little things, then success surely awaits. This has undoubtedly been conveyed in a style that resonates with Oblivion players in order to speak vicariously to them through their character: not to exhort them to strive to achieve more with their lives of course, but to employ a language that will reinforce the sense of achievement and reward that they are gaining from playing the game and levelling up – that language being that of the techniques of ‘ultra-subjectivation’ that Dardot and Laval had decried as geared towards only enhancing effectiveness, not towards the task of attaining a stable ethical relation to the self.

Players will have come across the glut of techniques of the self-help industry, the animating drive of which is to render an individual more effective through the self-persuasion that the resources required can be found within us. For Dardot and Laval, this is well exemplified in the theory of US psychologist Will Schutz (1994), whose emphasis on seizing one’s autonomy through the realisation of one’s freedom, which is then translated into career-enhancing action, can be summed up as follows: ‘I choose my own life – my behaviour, thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories, health, everything – or I choose not to know I have a choice. I am autonomous when I choose the whole of my life’ (cited in Dardot & Laval, 2013, p.273).\footnote{It is a radical individualisation in which all forms of social crises are perceived primarily as individual ones, and all inequalities are made the responsibility of individuals (ibid., p.277).}

On the other hand, however, a much more charitable (and perhaps strained) reading of the tone and style makes it also arguably reminiscent of Foucault’s interpretation of Seneca, whose writings became, for Foucault, more emblematic of what it was to be an ‘experience book’ than even the works of figures like Blanchot and Bataille had been.\footnote{According to Foucault, the Delphic inscription gnôthi sauton – a} Magill’s examples of R.D. Laing’s (1960) and Woodward’s (1988) approaches, as mentioned earlier, are ones that may be given as more positive counterpoints to Schutz’s pernicious example of self-help.

\footnote{As opposed to a ‘truth book’ or a ‘demonstration book’, which try to illuminate through didactic teachings, an ‘experience book’ reveals the taken-for-granted ways of}
calling for self-knowledge – had been reinterpreted by Seneca to involve the claim that the self, envisaged almost as an interlocutor, needed a self-care, which, as we have seen, bore far more positive connotations than Christian asceticism; his *vindica te tibi!* could be translated as ‘lay claim to yourself for yourself!’ Therefore, there can be said to be an ambivalence orbiting the work on the self even within the tone of the game texts that the player triggers at various intervals.

The game’s prompting of the player to think about themselves through blurring the line between taking care of your character and taking care of oneself, as we have seen, highlights an important issue. If it is arguably the case that games such as *Oblivion* expedite players to aim only at ingenious ways transforming the in-game situation, as opposed to a transformation of the players themselves, then the degree of self-consciousness at one’s self-transformation may be critical. The conflation between the in-game character and the player may therefore bring this point to the player’s attention. That is to say, the care of the self requires practices that are consciously orientated towards the transformation of the self. There can be a state of affairs that holds for one individual where he or she does not directly aim to transform themselves in order to accomplish their goals in the computer game, but the accomplishment or attempt at it through striving at changing in-game states may resultantly bring about a transformation of the self through the practices entailed. This would be in contrast to a different situation, where another individual *self-consciously* aims to transform themselves through their playing of the game, perhaps as a result of the rhetorics used in the game.

On this point, Foucault believed that the patterns of action that appeared to their practitioners to be coherent and intelligible were shown by a critical history not to be as rational, inevitable, or invariable as they were thought to be. They were processes that he claimed could be discerned against a larger background that could be called the ‘system of thought’, and so were not articulated self-consciously by the individuals themselves. However, his argument does not divorce the two, since it assumes that there is a connection between, on the one hand, observable changes in patterns of interpretation and action, and changes in subjective experience on the other. We can study the forms of our everyday experience, Foucault stated, as determined by forms of knowledge, power and relation to the self, through an analysis of practices – as long as

knowing and doing in the present, which highlights the fragility of the present and the possibilities for change (Foucault, 2000 [1980], p.246). It is essentially aimed at inculcating the aforementioned ‘wandering’ or ‘tearing away’ in its readers from themselves.
we understand practices as ‘systems of action…inhabited by forms of thought’ (Foucault, 1991 [1984], p.335). However, Foucault also seemed to state that there is a danger of aligning the attitude or ethos of the care of the self too closely with the actions themselves, since we already know that ‘the ancients were less interested in the nature of the acts themselves, than in the attitude one adopted in relation to them’ (O’Leary, 2002, p.41), which is why Foucault valued the existence of this gap, for it lead to the non-prescriptiveness that he valued so highly – no acts were in themselves prohibited. Further, actions could be performed in bad faith. Sexual austerity, which was praiseworthy for its evidencing of self-mastery, was sometimes a ‘trend’ for the aristocracy that enabled them to ‘display their snobbery and pretensions’; the Stoics mentioned that there was arrogance in the feats ‘by which alleged sages publicly flaunt their solitude and make a display of their withdrawal from society’ (Gros, 2005, p.531; p.537). These individuals were accused of not maintaining the distance between themselves and their actions despite their abstinence from boys being deemed the correct mode of action. Thus, I note here the existence of this inconsistency in his work, of practices being inhabited by thought but also potentially at a certain remove from them.

I have thus far advanced a reading of epimeleia heaton in which thought is immanent to the practices themselves and not discerned by reference to the subject’s subjective interpretations or meanings. Patterns of action or the overall disposition evidence that subjective experience and also the work on and transformation of the self, which closes any gap between actions and the ethoi that might underlie them. As such, the player’s attempts at in-game transformation, entailing the practices that it does, can therefore be mapped onto the transformation of the self in a way that does not delimit what can be achieved with respect to the latter. Thought resides within practices, and it cannot be presumed that the lack of an individual’s explicit declaration or intention that they are working on the self, as opposed to merely playing the game, can define the issue as to whether or not there is present care of the self. The critical question, I have argued, is whether the practices themselves speak to our embodied rationality.

Given the inconsistency in Foucault’s work, other readings have alleged that this view potentially insulates us from a reflective experience or self-interpretive movement (Han, 2002) required for transformation. Certainly, it seems that Foucault’s comments on transfiguration require some form of commitment to the individual being critical and reflexive to the present (the ‘ironic heroization’ of it); it does not seem sufficient that
the individual engages in habitual practices that may fortuitously happen to be in tune with our embodied rationality. The transformation of the self, if it is to occur in a beneficial manner, moving the individual towards freedom, arguably cannot result from an accident or side-effect of the practices undertaken by the player, but must arise through the player’s self-conscious, and even critical work on the self. This view, however, faces an additional complication: it surely cannot hold that the transformation must be entirely premeditated by the individual, with all of its consequently foreseen to the letter – that would hardly qualify as a ‘wandering’, given that the term connotes that the destination is one that is not instrumentally planned or known in advance. Therefore, there must be some kind of articulation, of what is sufficient to count as this kind of self-conscious yet undetermined criticality, although it is not clear that Foucault has produced one.\footnote{We might deduce that it may be the existence of an attitude that somehow cannot be inferred from the practices themselves; I have already remarked that optimised levelling may evidence both a critical and ‘truthful’ approach to the game as well as a desire to be effective. This would indicate different attitudes driving what on the surface would appear to be very similar practices, with this difference having a not insignificant impact on our assessment of the criticality involved.}

This thesis does not aim to provide a definitive answer to this particular issue of Foucauldian scholarship but recognises that there is a critique against the possibility of beneficial transformation from self-recognition. In the next chapter, I explore Schiller’s conception of ‘play’ as offering us resources with which to reveal the practices of the self in a new light, and clarify the criteria by which we may judge transformation. The practices must be informed by our use of reason – they may thereby be said to meet the requirement of being more than merely habitual, but also consciously intended; they must also be informed by our non-rational senses – they are not absolutely determined by a cognitive schema that can be known in advance, but are driven by our embodied natures. This framework will therefore have the additional function of reconciling the overall argument with the requirement that the care of the self requires a self-interpretive moment.
Chapter five

The mediation of play in the aesthetic practices of the self

The previous chapter’s assessment of the conditions in which practices of the self take place in Oblivion has raised the concern that it directs some players towards a style of self-constitution consonant with neoliberal self-fashioning. In particular, the ambivalence between neoliberal self-fashioning and the transformative practices of the self cast doubt on there being any decidability between practices that assist towards freedom and those that further entrench us in our existing subjectivities. This chapter aims to provide further resources for disambiguation. The structure of anticipation and deferral, which was revealed to be shared between various inferred typologies, requires some interpretation. It can be prima facie understood to evince a repressive normalisation effected by neoliberal rationality, to be due to the coercive operation of power on our very relations to self, and the subsumption of all other considerations for a calculated future. However, it is also possible to detect a moment of freedom within our sacrifice of the present and with our accord with a form of calculative rationality. The aim, at this juncture, is not so much to attempt to put these competing interpretations on a level footing with one another, but to better understand how they may be intertwined.

This chapter will argue that the attempt to avoid what is perceived to be a coercive rationality is doomed as a form of regression, and that it is more profitable to turn to a dialectical position between rationality and sense. Friedrich Schiller’s aesthetic theory, that we have a faculty for mediating between two drives or modes of being that, when imbalanced, thwart our realisation as rational-sensuous beings, provides a useful resource with which to consider this issue, and connects to previous discussions concerning our ‘embodied rationality.’ As such, with regard to neoliberal self-fashioning, this Schillerian perspective may be able to deduce the cases when what could be called a repressive reason is dominant, in which there is an excess of instrumentality involved in our motivations, and under the understanding that this repressive reason runs counter to our embodied rationality.\textsuperscript{168} It should also enable us to

\textsuperscript{168} I do not mean to suggest that neoliberal self-fashioning is characterised by an excess of instrumental concerns, but only that such an excess is indicated by its fomenting of
see, conversely, that we should be wary of a complete turn away from reason, and that the mediation performed by Schiller’s concept of ‘play’ is a form of being informed by both reason and the senses, or the harmonisation of the *logos* with the *bios*, as we have seen in chapter one. In this way, the aim here is to denounce the opposition to instrumental reason and to asceticism as superficial, and to obtain a more nuanced comprehension of the calculative anticipation and deferral at stake. Once this is accomplished, we will be able to return to the anticipation and deferral in *Oblivion* with a newfound perspective.

This detour to Schiller brings out an inflection of self-constitution that enables us to see the balance between reason and sense in Foucault’s understanding of the practices of the self – the practices of the self, when understood to be motivated by the play drive, can enable us to avoid pernicious forms of self-formation. Thus, the practices of the self are read through Schiller in order to bring out what I have argued to be key aspects of Foucault’s underlying ethical assumptions. In particular, this would be that we have an embodied rationality, with which self-practices ought to harmonise; this is an assumption which effectively amounts to a concession to ‘authenticity’ that is contrary to Foucault’s writings (to the differentiation between there being authentic and inauthentic kinds of harmonisation with our embodied rationality), though there are also some additional qualifications to this position. Further, the use of Schiller will assist us in arriving at a comparatively more dialectical position with respect to rationality and impulse, or reason and sense, than one which unambiguously leans towards either the former or the latter; this dialectical approach is a suitable means by which to emphasise the sophistication of the practices of the self as ethico-aesthetic guidelines that are implemented in a manner that is appropriate to the subject, but which is also certainly not without form or content.

The difficulties with this Schillerian emphasis will be considered, particularly the critique that the reliance on faculties that we possess, such as the ‘understanding’ and the ‘imagination,’ is essentialist, or may be in fact unreliable within certain contexts – it will be seen that it is unnecessary to subscribe to Schiller’s assumptions *tout court*. Given that the function of mediation is performed by the ‘play drive,’ the literature on play that has privileged spontaneity and imagination over rationality and asceticism is also criticised in this chapter. Finally, the chapter’s move towards what may be perceived as subjects’ desire to conform with the ideals perpetuated in discourse, most notably the successful entrepreneurial self.
a positive ethical content in the work of Foucault will culminate in some conclusions about the antinomic relation between the Dionysian and Apollonian elements in the ethical ground upon which he relies. The implications of this for understanding self-constitution in computer games are revealed in the manner of a series of considerations that will reframe the way in which we think through the ambiguities of self-formation.

The forgotten coercion

In order to show that the anticipation and deferral in gameplay, together with the use of calculative reason, can be recuperated as a form of self-constitution which can potentially be utilised to break us from the subjectivities imposed on us, I first turn to Foucault’s understanding of the origins of subjectivity. This reveals the progression of his thinking past the project of railing against an initial repressive coercion that is thought to form us as subjects. His crucial move was to the practices of the self, which are more concerned with reflective asceticism, with pragmatism and with ‘truth,’ than with a break from a coercive unification that severs us from a more preferable mode of being. As such, this will leave various inroads for the practices of the self to be understood with the Schillerian inflection of play, which will be argued for later in the chapter.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1981, p.58) explored the replacement of group-identity, in which an individual is ‘vouched for by the reference to others and the demonstration of his ties to the commonweal’, that characterised traditional societies by a form of identity that depended upon the individual being able to articulate their private experience: he was ‘authenticated by the discourse of truth he was obliged to pronounce concerning himself’. This shift, whereby subjects come to be conceived as self-determining and self-contained individuals, has occurred only ‘relatively recently in Western history’ (Pippin, 2005, p.7). Such a transformation, from an individual bound to others to an individual that played a much greater part in defining himself or herself, was the fundamental change towards a profoundly different state of increased self-awareness and scrutinisation. The unification of the self implied by a self-reflexive, self-conscious, self-monitoring subject with a moral practical relation to self that can articulate his or her own domain of private experience has been posited to originate from coercion, for which Foucault is indebted to Nietzsche. As Peter Dews (1984, p.85)
recounts, in the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche (2013 [1887]) had declared that responsibility originated through the constitution of ‘an animal with the right to make promises’; it is through promises that the constancy of its own future conduct could be guaranteed. This called for man’s self-regulation, which in turn required a particular ingredient: the threat of violence. Only through coercion could man be rendered ‘up to a certain point regular, uniform, equal among equals, calculable’ (II, 2). This internalised, morally controlled subject was achieved through the enforcing of a block or repression of those spontaneous instincts that threatened responsibility and constancy (II, 16). Nietzsche thought that it was the effecting of this block that brought about the ‘internalization of man’ and the creation of the ‘soul’; any instincts that do not discharge themselves outwardly are forced to turn inward (II, 16).

Dews (1986) argues that the central axis of Foucault’s whole oeuvre can be understood to be concerned with the Nietzschean heritage of the repression of spontaneity tied to the formation of the self-reflective subject of the modern age together with the concomitant procedures employed in the institutions that rose up with modernity to effect this introversion of impulse and repression. Foucault’s work can be seen to develop the idea of a profound repression further in his investigations into the hermeneutics of the self, where the individual becomes attuned to the verbalisation of inner experience, to manifest a sensitive and complex interiority. However, in his reading of ancient Greco-Roman practices of the self, the late Foucault certainly does not seem to be advocating for the release of a blockage or repression, but for a self-aware form of asceticism, as we have seen in chapter one. As such, his response to the coercive unification underlying subjectivity had broken free from the assumptions that drove the poststructuralist turn to desire in the late 60s and 70s. Therefore, the similarities between his theoretical foundations and that of the désirants ought to be de-emphasised. Deleuze and Guattari had, for example, in *Anti-Oedipus*, celebrated the schizophrenic fragmentation of experience and accompanying loss of identity as a

169 This can even be detected as far back as Foucault’s first major work, *Madness and Civilization*, in which the prime object of analysis is the kind of modern self-reflective subjectivity and responsibility that was antithetical to any spontaneity unfettered by truth. *Discipline and Punish* was also in part concerned with the formation of the moral-practical relation to self that constitutes the central dimension of modern self-critical subjectivity (Dews, 1984, p.86).

170 It is perhaps these views on the inculcation of subjectivity that have provided the groundwork for what is probably the philosophical model traditionally associated with Foucault: that subjects qua self-reflective, self-conscious, self-policing subjects are entirely constituted by the operations of power (Dews, 1984, p.85).
liberation from the self that arises out of the Oedipus complex, whilst Jean-François Lyotard’s concept of the ‘libidinal band’ attempted to capture the essence of something that completely escapes instrumentalisation: ephemeral intensities that are for their own sake and nothing else, where no moment is for another (Dews, 1986, pp.31-33). As Dews (2007) puts it, what these perspectives have in common is to have taken inspiration from Nietzsche’s equation of liberation with the unmitigated expression of instinct. The common goal is that of the unblocking of a repressed spontaneity that resides in a pre-subjective or pre-discursive ‘self’. The hope was to incite the pre-social inner nature or body of drives to bring about social revolution.

Yet the privileging of uniqueness without reference to anything else, such as meaning, purpose, or objective, as the only conceivable means to dissolve the reflective unity of the self arguably sacrifices too much and leaves too little left. What remains without the unifying self is perhaps only the monotonous repetition of boundless intensity devoid of context or sense, with desires becoming incoherent. Theodor Adorno (1973) has remarked that a liberation of ‘desire’ from all constraining identity would cease to be a liberation at all, since there would no longer be a self to enjoy the lifting of the barriers. Such a subject would be ‘ephemeral and condemned’; equated directly with subjective freedom, it is ‘a destructive force which incorporates men only so much more into the spell of nature’ (Adorno, 1973, p.281; p.241). Adorno (1978, p.499) considered ‘the undifferentiated state before the subject’s formation’ to be ‘the dread of the blind web of nature, of myth’, writing that ‘if the subject were liquidated rather than sublated in a higher form, the effect would be regression – not just of consciousness, but a regression to real barbarism’. For him, the anticipatory deferral or sacrifice of the moment for the future was necessary at a certain stage of history in order for human beings to liberate themselves from blind subjugation to nature. It was an inevitable outcome of the drive for self-preservation, and it contains within it a moment of freedom. Yet under capitalism, instrumental reason fomented a social order which thwarts its own original purpose, the preservation of the subject. The ‘spell of selfhood’ had been formed in the grasping towards freedom and contained the

\[171 \text{ Lyotard (1971, p.213) tried to affirm a ‘transitivism of a spontaneous aesthetic’, which is essentially the force of an inner nature, attacking all theoretical discourses as apparatuses for the fixation and draining away of intensity’.} \]

\[172 \text{ If self-identity is considered to be inherently repressive, then any construction of a new form of identity or subjectivity can only appear as a further form of repression (Dews, 1984).} \]
possibility of being broken by the subject that it constituted, although this would be realisable only upon a full transformation of social relations (Dews, 1986, p.43).

The solution, through reconciliation, could only come dialectically. Sublation could only be realised by breaking through and surpassing the façade of self-identity by attaining ‘a mode of subjectivity which would preserve the reflective unity of self in a form no longer inimical to the diffuseness and spontaneity of impulse’ (Dews, 1984, pp.79-80). Regression could not be the means with which to ‘use the force of the subject to break through the deception of constitutive subjectivity’ (Adorno, 1973, p.xx). 173 In this, we can discern a parallel with Schiller’s aesthetic education of man, not least because of the influence Schiller had on Adorno. 174 Schiller had focused more specifically on ‘play’, and he championed play as effecting a mediation between sense and reason, or, between spontaneity and reflection. Jameson (1971, p.87) points out that Schiller believed aspects of reflection, or the reflective unity of the self, to be already based on the subject’s identification with the divisions in the world:

Schiller draws a signal advantage from his model: for the application of Cartesian logic – the logic of introspection, of the cogito – to the social organism already implied an identification between the inner and the outer; and Schiller’s profound originality, which will leave its mark on thinkers from Hegel to Freud, was to have reversed this identification and transferred the notion of the division of labor, of economic specialization, from the social classes to the inner functioning of the mind, where it assumes the appearance of a hypostasis of one mental function over against the others, a spiritual deformation which is the exact equivalent of the economic alienation in the social world outside.

In this way, neither ‘spiritual deformation’ nor ‘economic alienation’ exists apart from the other; political progress is tied to the ennoblement of the character or work on the

173 On the reflective unity of self, Dews (1984, p.95) has argued that ‘Foucault’s peremptory equation of subjectification and subjection erases the distinction between the enforcement of compliance with a determinate system of norms, and the formation of a reflexive consciousness which may subsequently be directed in a critical manner against the existing system of norms’. This inheritance still lurks in the background of Foucault’s later work when it comes to considering the practices of the self even as he steered towards a notion of ‘truth’ uncoupled from discourse and seemed to reveal a preference for the ancient practices beyond that of a function as a means to distance us from a hermeneutics of the subject.

174 See *Minima Moralia* (2005 [1951], §§53-54; §94).
self. Herbert Marcuse had, in *Eros and Civilization*, delved into Freud’s proposition that civilization is based on the subjugation of human instincts, and he drew a connection between social material progress and psychic repression. In asking whether there could be a non-repressive kind of civilization, Marcuse had turned to the development of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, understanding it to be a discipline that arose from the need to defend the inherent truth-value of the senses against their subsumption under the reality principle. It was Schiller who had used aesthetics in order to elaborate the conditions of possibility – how ‘man’s psyche’ would have to be constructed ‘in order for a genuinely free and harmonious personality to become one day a real possibility’ (Jameson, 1971, p.115).

**Schiller’s Spieltrieb**

If the poststructuralist critique of the subject and of the reflective unity of subjectivity is the result of the facile evaluation of the modern subject, then it was in fact a similarly facile evaluation, albeit one that was reversed, against which Schiller reacted. For the former, any moral self-control is seen as a lamentable internalised social compulsion; for the latter, such a compulsion is deemed necessary and inescapable for subordinating the individual to the social good. This, in fact, reinforces the need for the solution to be a dialectical one. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant, embodying the latter, had argued for the subordination of man’s sensuous desires to the moral law by means of the

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175 Schiller was, for Marcuse, someone who anticipated, before Marx, the concepts of alienation and reconciliation (Sharpe, 1995, p.91). Stephen Gaukroger (1986) has argued that Marx’s conception of socialism overcoming alienation is grounded in an aesthetic conception of labour, where the ‘aesthetic’, as Schiller reminds us, was not initially confined to the sphere of art. Rather, it pointed to a disposition or mode of being in which ‘man’ comes into his full powers not through reason alone but through a process or activity of self-making in which reason and the senses, freedom and necessity, are played off against each other (Hunter, 1988, p.111). In this sense, Marx’s conception of labour assumes ‘the same schema of division, alienation, reconciliation, and self-formation already seen in Schiller’s account of culture’ (ibid.).

176 Schiller affirms the necessity of work on the self. He had been preoccupied by the question of whether it was possible to inculcate new subjectivities without resort to repression or subjectification after he witnessed some of the horrors of the French Revolution, which saw the mutation of the ideals of freedom and a new society into uncontrolled violence. For him, this evidenced the inability of radical change to bring about positive social transformation when the social conditions were not ripe, when individuals had not yet achieved the necessary internal state.
‘categorical imperative’ such that the obedience of moral commandments could only be done out of a duty to the moral law, rather than any willingness. This has been stated to be a resoundingly ‘negative view of man’s natural being’ (Wertz, 2005, p.85), to be based on a similar assessment of man’s evil nature as that of Locke and Hobbes’ views, which had called for a social contract, and which effects a repression of man’s natural instincts. For Schiller, what was required was for man to use his capacity through reason ‘to transform the work of necessity into his free choice, and to elevate physical necessity to a moral one’ (Letter III).

Kant had characterised an aesthetic experience as one where the mental faculties of the imagination and the understanding are in a ‘free play’. The imagination is not constrained by the understanding as it is in ordinary cognition, where the receptive faculty of the imagination usually synthesises the data acquired by sense-perception according to concepts provided to it by the active faculty of the understanding according to rules. With the aesthetic experience, the imagination in a free play does not deploy any particular concept. However, there is still a synthesis, and the imagination functions in a rule-governed way but without being governed by any rule in particular – this is ‘lawfulness without a law’, and it is this which gives the impression that the beautiful has been made in accordance with a rule, though that rule cannot be cognitively comprehended. There is then, a harmonious mutual quickening that is different to ordinary cases of judgment, and in which neither faculty had preponderance over the other.

Schiller inherits this Kantian division, but he is also a critic of Kant. Rather than appealing to disinterested aesthetic contemplation, he argues that ‘play’ is what performs the function of harmonious mediation. The play drive (Spieltrieb) can help us avoid the twin pitfalls to which we are prone, by transforming the conflict between the sense drive (Sinnestrieb/Stofftrieb), or passion, and the formal drive (Formtrieb), or reason, into aesthetic pleasure. He writes that: ‘man can be opposed to himself in a twofold manner: either as a savage, when his feelings rule over his principles; or as a barbarian, when his principles destroy his feelings’ (Letter IV). Therefore, for Schiller, a play impulse, whose object is beauty, mediates between the sense impulse and the form-giving impulse, allowing man to synthesise the sensuous and rational aspects of his

177 It is not specified by Kant why this free play is pleasurable, nor the extent to which it is deemed intelligible. On this point, But it also needs to be a transcendental principle justifying judgments of beauty. See, however, Paul Guyer’s (2005) defence of the free play as a natural psychological process.
nature. It is operative in the creation or contemplation of beauty since beauty breaks from the physical realm of pure sense, while resisting complete capture by consciousness. By saying this, Schiller is gesturing to a reconciliation that avoids on the one hand an ontology of flux that results from a turn to the pure spontaneity of desire, and on the other, an alienation from non-cognitive ways of being that is particularly associated with rationalisation and scientific knowledge: he writes, for example, about how utility, even in the 1790s, had become the great idol of his time (Letter II). Jacques Rancière agrees with Schiller and thinks that play can enable us to experience a sensorium, or way of being, that is not grounded in domination, not subject to the coercion underlying subjectivity, since the unreconciled application of reason, or the understanding, does not come into it. Rancière (2009 [2004], p.30) defines Schiller’s notion of play as ‘any activity that has no end other than itself, that does not gain any effective power over things or persons’, and aligns it with a new way of being or distribution of the sensible.

Doris Sommer’s (2009, p.89) interpretation of the kind of ‘play’ envisaged by Schiller and by Rancière is as an imaginative experimentation; she writes: ‘[t]he best part of humanity is our capacity to experiment, to rearrange and select existing materials, to imagine unprecedented combinations; that is, to play’. Schiller himself unfortunately does not give exact examples, but he does indicate that ordinary games are by no means excluded from the play that he envisages. This has been understood as a Schillerian impurification of Kantian disinterestness; Schiller asks:

Is not the beautiful degraded by this, that it is made a mere play? And is it not reduced to the level of frivolous objects which have for ages passed under that

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178 It is a particular conception of beauty, however, which derives ‘from his conception of human nature as being in the image of the Creator’ (Wertz, 2005, p.92) as a sensuous-rational being. It is not merely a charming exterior but a pure rational conception of beauty that cannot be inductively derived from experience (Letter X).

179 For Rancière, politics and democracy should not be about the construction of a particular kind of subject. The non-instrumentality of ‘play’ figures in his concept of ‘subjectivation’, which he described as the process by which individuals stray from their ‘natural’ allotment of capacities in order to inhabit new bodies. Subjectivation operates upon the identities allotted by a dominant culture, locating within them opportunities for the demonstration of new capacities (Tanke, 2011, p.49). ‘It is precisely this new form of distribution of the sensible’, Rancière (2009 [2004], p.30) writes, ‘that Schiller captures with the term ‘play’. Minimally defined, play is any activity that has no end other than itself, that does not gain any effective power over things or persons.’ See Chambers (2013, p.101) on Rancière’s uses of ‘subjectivation’ and ‘subjectivization’, and also footnote 69.
name?...and does it not contradict the empirical conception of play, which can coexist with the exclusion of all taste, to confine it merely to beauty?...What you style limitation…I name enlargement. Consequently, I should have said exactly the reverse: man is serious only with the agreeable, with the good, and with the perfect, but he plays with beauty. (Letter XV).

Imaginative experimentation and unprecedented combinations suggest themselves in the course of an aesthetic self-stylisation that gives an overall form to one’s play within a game. There is seemingly an emphasis on daring to try the novel in Somner’s phrasing, but this can be rather vacuous when taken by itself as a style of existence without further context – I have gestured towards this point in relation to the futility of transgressiveness in the practices of the self if the transgressiveness is not due to the ‘truth’ of a transgressive way of life, or to defend a principle of ‘truth’ that is threatened. Foucault’s conception of self-practice not only encompasses curiosity and transgression, as we have seen, and into which we might incorporate the imagination of unprecedented possibilities, but also challenges us to integrate these together with a more pragmatic mindset geared towards existing in the world, and with the slow work of ascetic practices. In this sense, it captures a more sophisticated framing of the dialectic than Somner’s turn to the power of the unprecedented. We should also be reminded that for players, gameplay itself is seldom merely experimentation without context or purpose. The purposes involved frequently have to do with the player’s participation in the analytical learning cycle, such that experimentation yields the kind of knowledge of regularities that will prove useful in analytically mapping the game – an endeavour that cannot be detached from a relation to the use of reason.

So the question that raises itself is: what does play, as an activity or practice, have to be in order to accomplish the Schillerian mediation we have attributed to the aesthetic practices of the self? And what can be gleaned about the practices of the self that lead us to freedom as they are understood through this Schillerian inflection, as adjudged by the play drive as mediator? Clearly, play, with the aesthetic accent given to it by Schiller, has to be about following the rule that cannot be conceptualised, rather than purposeless spontaneous activity, which has some associations with freeform play. In this sense, the literature on play that views rationality, as the calculated sacrifice of the moment, and patterned ascetic actions, as anathema to play, is stymied by this attitude. The tendency to posit play as a negative Dionysian force that counters the
encroachment of rationality in fact diminishes the breadth of the role that play can have, and castigates various practices or activities for not truly being play.

Play has long been considered a source of our self-formation apart from the regimented world of work. Yet with the contemporary period, as described in the introduction to this thesis, either play has been co-opted: its potential for a critical ontology of ourselves diminished; or work has taken on some of the qualities of play; or some mixture of the two that veers one way or the other depending on particular circumstances. In postindustrial hypercapitalism ‘play is becoming as important in the cultural economy as work was in the industrial economy’ (Rifkin, 2000, p.263). Rifkin distinguishes between a ‘true’ form of play and an ‘impoverished’ form of play, writing that the commodified play of the market cannot compare to non-instrumental, spontaneous and intimate ‘pure play’: ‘the kind of play produced there…is only a shadow of the kind of play produced in the cultural sphere’ (ibid., p.265). Work has been made more playful/tolerable but the play principle itself is arguably subverted, and power reaches ‘beyond articulation and discourse into the extralinguistic sources of creativity in play’ (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p.15). Kline, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2003, p.245) similarly remark that ‘[t]he paradox of information capitalism is that even as it encourages an expanded enclave of freedom and self-development of ‘pure play,’ it begins to undermine that enclave by commodifying it. For the more play became distributed in the marketplace, the more its forms and boundaries were set by a commercialized media system.’

If the historico-critical investigations involved in the critical ontology of ourselves have, at least in the Western societies from which they derive, tended to recur in ‘the problem of the relationship between sanity and insanity, or sickness and health, or crime and the law; the problem of the role of sexual relations; and so on’ (Foucault, 1984b, p.49), then the work-play dynamic now suggests itself to be considered along these same lines. That is to say, computer games raise the problematic of our play with them, which, in the popular imaginary has its associations with a host of concerns: the frivolous idling away of time and ‘gamer regret’; repetitive, meaningless, labour; addiction and compulsion; ruthless competitiveness; and social withdrawal, among others. The result is, in some ways, a similar problematisation of the pleasures associated with gameplay to Foucault’s analysis of les plaisirs in sexual practices of Greco-Roman Antiquity – they could be enjoyed, but the individual had to master themselves to not be overcome by unruly pleasures.

‘Theorists of immaterial labor suggest one of the characteristics of intellectual and affective creation is a blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure, creating a continuum of productivity, and of exploitability, that is “beyond measure”’ (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p.356).
Mihail Spariosu in *Dionysus Reborn* (1989) has contended that there has always been disagreement among Western philosophers over whether play is basically an orderly and rule-governed affair, or a chaotic, violent, and indeterminate interaction of forces. Spariosu (1989, p.ix) says, ‘I relate my history of the play concept to a history of the Western mentality as a whole, suggesting that this mentality has always fluctuated between various rational and prerational sets of values’. Brian Sutton-Smith (1997, p.218) has concluded that play ‘should not be defined only in terms of restricted Western values that say it is non-productive, rational, voluntary, and fun’. The resistance of play to cognitive analysis has been widely remarked to be one of its essential features. However, this is not the same as the narrower sort of claim that play is threatened by, and essentially incompatible with, the encroaching forces of rationalisation. It is this kind of view, which is perhaps most paradigmatically embodied in the writings of Johan Huizinga, that has echoed down to the present in the literature on the social, cultural, and political consequences of digital games. The sense of play as sacralised and diametrically opposed to work, positions it as an activity that is easily contaminated by external forces, whilst Huizinga (2001 [1949], p.75) described modernity as, ‘a rank layer of ideas, systems of thought and knowledge, doctrines, rules and regulations, moralities and conventions which have all lost touch with play’.

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182 As Sutton-Smith (2001, p.221) states, ‘it is the variability of the play phenomena which most impresses the present author.’ He is careful to clarify that his focus lies in the way in which ‘the underlying ideological values attributed to [play]…are both subsumed by the theorists and presented persuasively to the rest of us’, with ‘the rhetorics of play’ expressing ‘the way play is placed in context within broader value systems, which are assumed by the theorists of play’ (2001, p.8).

183 Attempts at theorisation have often resorted to paradox in order to pin it down: Victor Turner (1974) calls play ‘liminal’ or ‘liminoid’, designating that it occupies a threshold between reality and unreality, whilst Mihail Spariosu (1989, p.1) calls it ‘amphibolous’, or going in two directions at once.

184 Johan Huizinga’s (1970) famous definition of play captures many of the rhetorics that have persisted into the twentieth century and consequently still commands an intuitive appeal. As a definition, it perhaps bespeaks Huizinga’s own position as ‘a mandarin, an elitist steeped in the ideals and comforts of high bourgeois culture’ (Steiner, 1970, p.13) with a romantic view of civilization that militated against rationalism, utilitarianism, and the worship of technological progress; Huizinga bemoaned the post nineteenth century world, in which ‘the dominants of civilization were to be social consciousness, educational aspirations, and scientific judgment’; ‘man is left to mould a tawdry industrial world ‘after the pattern of his own banality’’ (ibid., pp.12-13).

185 There is a strong imaginary that positions digital games as menacing the idyllic world of children’s play. Against ‘spontaneous play’ on beaches and in woods, a ‘play world of the natural child [that is] open and friendly’, is set the play world of ‘the ‘electronic
Feenberg and Grimes (2009, p.107), for example, echo this sentiment in their wish to investigate how games today, as ‘latecomers to modernizing processes that have already incorporated a wide range of generic human behaviours’, come to display the same broad characteristics of rationalisation as other institutions of social order and control. For them, the story is most decidedly that of a creeping rationality that comes to infiltrate all areas of life: ‘[r]ationalized play is thus not only congruent with the grand narrative of modernity, but also functions as a social practice that reproduces rationalization within yet another facet of everyday life’ (ibid.). What is threatened and reduced in a digital game where ‘the boundaries of a game are technically mediated and the participants of the game are incorporated into its design’ is ‘the potential for the kind of spontaneous negotiation of rules and exceptions that is a possible (and indeed desirable) part of game play when a game is played on an individual basis, for instance, between friends on a local playground’ (ibid., p.108). The loss of this spontaneity is equated with that of free choice, since ‘the players’ actions in a technically mediated game are reduced to a predetermined set of possibilities’ (ibid.).

It is more productive to read play not as a foil or contrast to the dominant modes of being or subjectification, standing outside them, but as enmeshed with them, and yet also attuned to our faculties, to our embodied rationality. Silverman and Simon (2009, p.354) have argued that ‘in modernity, one has to play because one works, and play in this sense, has no significant meaning outside its relationship to work’. They propose that now, good work is play, which is to say that the cultural values associated with play, such as freedom, autonomy and joy have become associated with good work, and at the same time, the negative values once associated with work are becoming endemic to play (ibid.). If play can also still be thought to always have a corrosive effect against power and to be unsubsumable in its entirety given that it is quasi-transcendental (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p.53), then it is because of the Schillerian idea of its role in the mediation of faculties, which shows us a way in which sense can feel harmonised with reason. As such, if what has been crushed by power is the operation of the imagination, child’...hemmed in by conflict and fear’ (Stutz, 1995, no page). ‘Compared with the worlds of imagination provided by play with dolls and blocks, [video] games...ultimately represent impoverished cultural and sensory environments for the child’ (Provenzo, 1991, p.97).

186 Feenberg and Grimes (2009, p.108), however, do stress the possibility of a ‘democratic rationalization’ by players, where player behaviours can often resist the underlying social order and restructure aspects of the game around player demands, in opposition to the rationalization imposed by the official corporate owners.
then the aim remains that of effecting the synthesis between understanding and imagination, rather than the denigration of instrumental reason or the promotion of true play as only being spontaneous.

The lens of a dialectical mediation effected by play between the *Stofftrieb* and the *Formtrieb*, and in the course of the practices of the self, sees it as mistaken to subscribe to a form of play that would be totally unfettered from rationality. The route to freedom ought not be through a direct opposition to work, practical thought, and rationality – should this even be possible – as it does not give due accord, for Schiller, to the rational part of man. To do so reaches towards the poststructuralist yearning for a pre-social spontaneity that in fact would result in a real regression. Play, however, is not reducible to merely the kinds of pragmatic reflection in ‘life’. Hence play’s special status for Kant and Schiller resides in its harmonising of the imagination and the understanding into a mutual quickening. Not just an empirical psychology, it also articulates the conditions under which play occurs: an activity that requires the individual to exercise both faculties. There is no rule that governs this exercise that can be codified, which is what insulates the domain of play, and of the aesthetic, from subsumption into science.

In light of the above, it is possible to seek out a concurrence between Schillerian play and Foucault’s practices of the self, in which the practices appeal to both reason and sense. In contrast to his earlier position, which, as Dews pointed out, was driven by following the Nietzschean heritage of the repression of spontaneity, his later work was characterised by a different stance towards reason. It is certainly interesting, for example, that he dwells as long on Kant’s championing of reason as he does in ‘What is Enlightenment?’ His assumption is that we want to break from our ‘immaturity’, and the ‘way out’ from our ‘immaturity’ was to substitute ‘the state of our will that makes us accept someone else’s authority to lead us’, such as when ‘a book takes the place of our understanding, when a spiritual director takes the place of our conscience, when a doctor decides for us what our diet is to be’, for the use of ‘reason’ (1984, p.34, emphasis added). On this point, he seems to share the view, alongside Kant, that reason has to

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187 The German word, *räsonieren*, refers to ‘a use of reason in which reason has no other end but itself: *räsonieren* is to reason for reasoning’s sake’ (Foucault, 1984, p.36). One reasons ‘as a reasonable being (and not as a cog in a machine), when one is reasoning as a member of reasonable humanity’, in which case ‘the use of reason must be free and public’ (ibid., p.37), which is to say, not due to the demands of one’s job or some other circumscribed position. There is, therefore, the question as to *when* a use of reason is free. The use of one’s reasoning faculties is surely without any compulsion or circumscription in the domain of play, barring those instances in which instrumental
be separated from obedience. However, Foucault also encourages us to reject the ‘blackmail’ of the Enlightenment – that one must be either for or against its tradition of rationalism, which leaves one in an invidious position either way. If one is for it, then one falls foul of his warnings of forms of domination and subjection to identities; but if one is against, one is perhaps left without any grounds or standards on which to build a critical ontology of ourselves. As such, Foucault’s aesthetic practices of the self can be defended as avoiding the pitfalls described by Schiller. The practices of the self are an inherently teleological enterprise – the fourth major aspect is explicitly stated by Foucault to be the telos, the mode of being towards which one aims in behaving ethically. This form of deferral and self-reflection perhaps has the tendency to slip into instrumental training exercises or neoliberal self-fashoning as a form of personal enterprise, as we have seen, but also plays a role in avoiding a vulgar turn to pure spontaneity. The practices of the self concern long term goals and efforts, and a vision of what we want to make ourselves; they are certainly not based on instinct alone. It can be said that they are not governed by explicitly codified rules, and yet they are reflexive; the telos, whatever that may be, is rationally motivated, and exists in a circular relationship to the activities, which are practical, in a state of constant modulation. In this way, this form of working on ourselves exhibits an openness rather than the closedness of conformity to a pre-existing ideal. As such, rational goals can be seen to not override our sensuous instincts. What remains is a self that is coherent because it is constructed from minute practices that are tied in to an ultimately unrepresentable holistic coherence or attitude that surpasses any cognitive rule.

However, this may still be a precarious precipice to occupy. We may surmise that there were times when the ancient practitioners of self-care have failed to walk this tightrope between sense and reason. Foucault is known to have exclaimed, seemingly in a moment of despair, that ‘[a]ll of antiquity seems to me to have been a ‘profound error’ (Foucault, 1988c, p.244). His investigations into the ancient practices yielded the concerns rest on the outcome. If so, then the use of our ‘reason’, during the course of play may demonstrate for us the possibility of breaking from our immaturity, that another kind of existence is possible. Although Foucault’s description does not evoke the full connotations of Kant’s extensive terminology, it does seem to indicate that this reason originates from us, or our capacity for reason, and is not imposed on us as a form of knowledge to which we are subject.

In his explicit statements, however, Foucault was of the view that self-constitution itself is not to be understood teleologically, in a way that culminates in a form of ultimate realisation or Aufhebung (Han, 2002, p.163), despite his reliance on the body and on the ancients’ commitment to ‘truth’ and to ‘nature’.
findings that sexual austerity was often a ‘trend’ for the elites of classical Greece, allowing them to display their ‘snobbery and pretensions’, whilst late Stoicism saw the start of individuals being told that they had to do something or other because they are a rational being, and which paved the way for Christianity (Gros, 2001, p.531). Foucault proclaimed the social superiority and contempt for the other in the former ‘disgusting’ (1983, cited in Gros, 2001, p.532), whilst he detected ‘the anticipation of a codification of morality as tyrannical and normalizing obligation’ (Gros, 2001, p.532) in the latter. In this way, there may be a perversion of what the practices of the self could have been at its best into codified rules (a domination of the rational) or into a form of narcissistic dandyism (the triumph of the sensuous).

The non-cognitive basis

Given that the ‘correct’ manner of self-constitution, as leading to the practices of the self that free us, is adjudged non-cognitively, since the understanding works together with the imagination in play, certain problems or suspicions may arise. The question concerning the source of the ‘rightness’ of the correct practices of the self, given that they move us to increase our autonomy and freedom, has already been encountered in chapter one. Why is it that the pursuit for a stylistic coherence in our patterns of action can drive us in a direction conducive to realising autonomy and freedom rather than misleading us? It seems to call, ultimately, for a reliance on some crucial Archimedean point that can only originate from within the subject, from the body as ‘deep.’ As such, it has to be indicated by an un-cognisable feeling, experience, or mode of being that accompanies the proper practices – this lies in the realm of the aesthetic. Otherwise, by resorting to cognitive and to determinate rules, every attempt to alter the existing processes of subjectification seems doomed to perpetuate the same forms of domination in a different guise. I have argued that Foucault’s turn to the ancient Greco-Roman practices of the self and his reading of the body as deep means that there is effectively a commitment to some set of quasi-transcendental non-cognitive guidelines for good self-practices.

If we arbitrate between beneficial and pernicious practices on the basis of a type of pleasure or aesthetic judgment that results from the mediation of faculties, then our capacity to do so rests on those faculties existing in everyone. Yet if the ‘experience’ of
‘good play’ is to count as evidence of the successful mediation between sense and reason, then it may be asked how we can know when we have had such an experience, and also how we can convey to others what it is. The non-cognitive cannot, by definition, be adequately conveyed or communicated in a transparent manner, though this fact does not render our communicative efforts worthless. As Foucault indicated, we are able to recognise the existence of a beautiful style in others, and this is surely facilitated through, and made on the basis of, some non-cognitive understanding or form of experience that accompanies our own practices. In any case, my contention here is that the turn to a Schillerian mediation enables us to see the issue of self-constitution in line with our embodied rationality as the interplay or harmonisation of two faculties, but also that it is constructive to understand this as play. To go about our self-formation in a way that gives due to the play drive is to have it guide our self-formation in a way that is consonant with something within us which resists domination insofar as it is not as subject to the flux of historical change as other parts of ourselves, though there will necessarily be difficulties in communicating this kind of experience. With its capacity for mediation, it is a means of drawing upon the way in which we have been configured to non-cognitively qualify and assess the practices at stake. Practices that tend towards an imbalance of reason or sense may be abandoned as not being conducive to the experience of play.

Foucault’s own explicit distinction between pernicious and beneficial forms of self-constitution was made on the basis of the difference between the search for authenticity and attempt to discover our true selves, on the one hand, as exemplified by the Californian cult of the self, and the interplay between the exercise of freedom and the truth of what is real, which is involved in the critical ontology of ourselves, on the other. Given that it is difficult to expel all traces of appeals to ‘authenticity’ and to the pre-discursive in Foucault’s ethico-aesthetic project, I have suggested this alternative based on the aesthetic mediation between sense and reason. For Schiller, in contrast, freedom was a condition to be strived towards, a ‘natural’ or ‘authentic’ state of our being. Foucault was very much opposed to the idea that this should be done through a discovery, particularly of the ways in which we may be configured, as opposed to a struggle that can never be concluded; the fact that we accept that we have a nature, such as a sexual nature, makes us subject to control, especially so if it involves the help of experts. Foucault (1984, p.44) believed the permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy, the principle at the heart of Enlightenment, to be opposed to humanism.
His objection to humanism was that whilst we need not conclude that everything linked to it must be rejected:

the humanistic thematic is in itself too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent to serve as an axis for reflection. And it is a fact that, at least since the seventeenth century, what is called humanism has always been obliged to lean on certain conceptions of man borrowed from religion, science, or politics’ (ibid.).

However, the first point, that it has proven too diverse to function as an axis, arguably overreaches itself; even if it is true that the ‘humanistic thematic’ is supple, it does not necessarily follow that it cannot ever provide ‘an axis for reflection’, or be used in a way that assists our wandering and practices of the self. The second point indicates a danger, the tendency to lean on dogmatic and potentially harmful conceptions of ‘man’, though it is a risk that may be mitigated through the self-reflexive awareness of the constructedness of any theoretical concepts. Further, Foucault did not explore the possibility that there are ways and contexts in which our rejection of the humanistic thematic can also make us subject to control, such as due to the kinds of cynicism that may lead to social conservatism and an unwillingness to challenge our historical limits, in which case the idea that we have a nature that is being trampled by existing social arrangements is likely to be motivational. In any case, we have seen that Foucault’s position is complicated by his turn to the ancient practices and the centrality of doing what is in accordance with nature and reason, and of bringing out ‘truth’ in order to attain a state of beyond-the-self. Thus, there may effectively be fewer clear-cut differences with the implicit ideal expressed in his late work, and the idea of a ‘natural’ or ‘authentic’ way of our being, than might initially appear.

Joseph Tanke (2011) has elaborated on the possibility of an intermediate position between Schiller and Foucault. He has proposed that Rancière’s use of the Kantian conception of the faculties in his reading of Schiller, can be understood to have re-conceptualised the ‘imagination’ from ‘the mentalistic language of German idealism’ (Tanke, 2011, p.151), which presupposes what is now deemed essentialist without appropriate justification – that certain faculties inhere in all of us – into general political and aesthetic propositions about social capacities.¹⁸⁹ Tanke argues that Rancière, for

¹⁸⁹ Tanke (2011, p.152) says that for Kant, the imagination ‘should be understood less as an innate part of mind or a ‘part of a whole’…and more as a force that creates
whom the imagination can be said to be ‘a trans-subjective capacity whose force is created through the assumption and practice of radical equality’ (ibid., p.157), ‘operates in an intellectual space cleared by post-structuralism’s critiques of the subject’ (ibid., p.156). On the assumption of equality, creativity is spurred, and the imagination ‘breaks the habitual sensory frameworks that prevent the full flourishing of human capacities, ushering them into new space-time configurations’ (ibid., p.157).\(^{190}\) Nevertheless, in the final instance, Tanke states that it is ‘necessary to retain something of Kant’s transcendental approach to the imagination’ (ibid., p.159). This is both because ‘the imagination distributes the sensible, thinkable, and possible,’ and because completely conceptualising it ‘in its freedom from the restraints of the understanding would subordinate it once again’ (ibid., p.159). In this way, ‘the investigation of its powers must be both philosophical-transcendental and political-experimental’ (ibid., emphasis added). We should ‘resist the effort to explain away the imagination by evoking crass materialisms that reduce it to expressions of class, gender, identity, historical context, and geographic locale’ but also recognise that ‘though it breaks from and disrupts the distributions of the sensible, it too is subject to its divisions’, or ‘touched by the world’s distributions’ (ibid., p.159). As a result:

[w]e need a deeply empirical account of the trans-subjective conditions that permit and/or block its activation. Such an undertaking would analyse the spatial and temporal configurations of our world in order to determine which are conducive to the imagination’s flourishing and which have been created in order to squelch its functioning. These inventories would catalogue the practices that affirm equality, either through textual, visual, or political practices, and then measure their results in terms of the advance of concrete inscriptions. (Tanke, 2011, p.160).

It may be surmised that Tanke, in order to avoid an infinite regress in which the capacity of the imagination is determined by material context, argues that the social capacity of the imagination is semi-autonomous from material context and so stems possibilities’ given the evocation of the standard Latin translation for the Greek word *dunamis* [capacity].

\(^{190}\) ‘If aesthetic ‘play’ and ‘appearance’ found a new community, it is because they are the sensible refutation of this opposition between intelligent form and sensible matter, which is really the difference between two humanities’ (Rancière, 2004, p.46).
from us, yet avoiding the option that it may be altogether autonomous. Without having to initiate a move into the work of Rancière, it is possible to see that Tanke’s conclusion indicates the crux of the matter, which is the difficulty of completely escaping from the need to ground an ethico-aesthetics in something that is not innate or persistent within us, given that he could be seen to have set out to historicise the transcendental in Schiller’s model, only to insist that the imagination cannot be understood via crass materialisms. It is this difficulty, which I have argued, underlies Foucault’s reluctant reliance on the body, reason, and the ‘truth’ of the harmony with something beyond ourselves.

The symmetry of the Stofftrieb and Formtrieb

The Schillerian dialectic in our practices of the self and relation to self is decided by us, through our aesthetic judgments, and through the experiences of harmonising the imagination and the understanding in a process in which the end and the activities required to attain it mutually inform each other. This is the way in which it is decided whether there has been a failure to balance sense with reason. However, this very basis has been called into question. Jameson (1971, p.96) believes that the warring impulses of the Stofftrieb and the Formtrieb were ‘still relatively symmetrical’ in Schiller’s time, but that by the 1920s, the organisation of the market system had led the Formtrieb to take an immense lead. The question then becomes whether it is possible for ‘need as a purely material and physical impulse (as something “natural”),’ to give way to commodity-driven ‘artificial longings,’ such that it is no longer possible ‘to separate the true from the false’ (Jameson, 1971, p.96). Given that the impulse in question is the play impulse, however, some commentators would disagree that it can be completely subverted. Kirkpatrick (2013, p.35), for example, has argued that ‘[i]t is unthinkable that play should be completely subordinated to the needs of the economic system or reduced to its function in a system of domination.’ This is because he reasons that we may reasonably expect that corruptions of play, or just poor play, will be refused by players (ibid., p.36), but even more fundamentally, due to the fact that although games are ‘prone to change depending on the cultural circumstances’, they are also ‘a deeply
rooted feature of the human condition’ (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p.41). That is to say, games rest upon an anthropologically given disposition to play, which is a constant of the human condition.

Jameson, on the other hand, has made the case that it is no longer possible to tell apart genuine impulse from artificial longing.\(^{192}\) If there is a state of affairs in which the preponderance of the *Formtrieb* means that it ‘imparts its own deformity to the very movement that seeks liberation from it’ (ibid.), then it would seem that we have to account for the dominance of practical interests, logic, rationality, and the cognitive in our assessment of where the liberatory harmony of play may obtain. Writers such as Pierre Klossowski (1997 [1970]) have pointed out that there are pleasures which we can take in our own self-exploitation, and Foucault has also commented that it is power that anchors the pleasure that it uncovered (see: Dew, 1984, p.94). Susan Bordo (1994, p.239) has written extensively about the processes of self-normalisation voluntarily practised by women: ‘self-starvation, addictive bingeing and purging’. Thus, on the basis of an imbalance in the *Stofftrieb* and *Formtrieb*, the reliance on a non-cognitive means by which to judge the harmony is impugned if we can take pleasures in self-destructive activities.\(^{193}\)

However, the momentary pleasures of meeting an artificial longing are surely not experientially the same as those of lasting contentment. If Klossowski and Jameson are taken to make the point that pernicious forms of pleasure are now *absolutely* indistinguishable from the real aesthetic pleasures that evidence practices of the self in accordance with our embodied rationality, then we would have nothing to fear if the so-called self-exploitative pleasures were stable and enduring, since there would be no way for us experientially (or in any other way) to tell them apart from what is non-

\(^{191}\) ‘The definition [of play] identifies a formal location or space that might be found doing all kinds of work in different cultural and historical settings’ (Kirkpatrick, 2013, p.42).\(^{192}\) It should not be said that the practices of the self do not concern pleasurable experience. The work of giving form to freedom requires the unification of those disparate elements that J.M. Synge has called ‘stoicism, asceticism and ecstasy’ (cited in O’Leary, 2002, p.155).\(^{193}\) It has been noted that the impact of ludefaction, or the project of transforming human activities into games to enhance their efficiency, can be discerned in ‘a certain stymieing of the radical imaginary: the facility we all have for conceiving a different way of living together by rethinking and reenacting the social’ (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p.2). On the issue of the ‘radical imaginary’, Kirkpatrick refers to Castoriadis (1975, p.264): ‘[The creative role of the radical imagination of subjects...is their contribution to the positing of forms, types/eides other than those that already exist.’
pernicious. That is to say, if they were absolutely indistinguishable, then we would certainly have no recourse to a set of ethical standards that condemned artificial longings, but nor would there be any reason left to condemn them.

In Foucault’s treatment of the Stoic theme of the pleasures, the pleasure brought by the care of the self (gaudium) was opposed to the type of pleasure (voluptas) that was external, precarious, and potentially violent or excessive (O’Leary, 2002, p.71), which seems to be a necessary distinction that can be made on the basis of the pleasure itself. Foucault (1990 [1984], p.66) suggests that gaudium acts as a substitute for the voluptas that the Stoic foregoes, but also that they are essentially very different kinds of phenomenon, with gaudium more akin to a state that is attained than a momentary pleasure. Thus, the worry raised by Jameson is perhaps not that the voluptas of artificial longings or neoliberal self-fashioning cannot be recognised even in principle by us, and that we can no longer rely on the validity of our faculties, but that we ought to take any potential imbalance or deformity into account. The need to distinguish them has not been abnegated. How this asymmetry is accounted for, and by whom, is a difficult issue. It may be through a resolute cognitive scepticism that the enjoyment from losing ourselves in super-instrumental play, for example, fails to constitute, or to be conducive to, the pleasure of the care of the self that arises from the mediation of sense and reason. Yet such accounting cannot, of course, take the form of the automatic cognitive trumping of non-cognitive judgments or risk becoming a prescriptive ethics.

The Dionysian and the Apollonian

I have traced in this thesis the idea that the practices of the self can be understood as, on the one hand, a negative Dionysian disarticulation from what we are, especially the subjectivities that have been imposed on us. It is transformation that is silent about preferable kinds of subjectivities, but seeks instead to ward against domination, which ossifies subjectification. On the other hand, there is the positive Apollonian move towards a beyond-the-self that was only tentatively invoked even when Foucault was at his most insistent. This reading sees Foucault as having been drawn to attempt to broach the task of, if not identifying a positive content to ethics, casting a provisional
line into the aether for such a positive content.\textsuperscript{194} My position has been to foreground the more controversial reading of Foucault that attempts to glean something from the positive move; the practices of the self are thereby more radically interpreted as about surpassing the self and reaching beyond the self, about chipping away the superfluous and the excess that hinders the self in order to attain a harmony with nature. This describes, on a Schillerian register, a loss of the self that desires, transcending the compulsiveness of sensuous impulses as well as the instrumentality of self-interested calculative rationality.

It is possible then, to register parallels between the ancient practices of the self that aimed at a beyond-the-self, and the Schillerian tradition that gave rise to Romanticism. Tanke (2011, p.158) has remarked that the concept of creativity forged by German idealism and romanticism has ‘a de-subjectifying pull that founds the imagination when they identified genius with nature.’ This is echoed by Nietzsche’s view that creation does not spring from the ‘I’, but takes place outside of oneself. In the \textit{Birth of Tragedy}, as Tanke (ibid.) states, Nietzsche ‘affirms Schiller’s suggestion that ‘images…emerge from a sundering of the ego’ and musical creation ‘ruptures the “principle of individuation,” scattering fragments of the individual among the “primal unity” of existence. Faced with this dissolution, and indeed because of it, art breaks away from nature through the creation of a second nature, the pleasing illusions that restore the individual’. It is with this dynamic that the source of creativity originating from the particularities of subjectivity is countered, and ‘the whole opposition between the subjective and objective…is altogether irrelevant in aesthetics’ (ibid.).

It is arguable then, that there is in fact both a negation and an affirmation in the move beyond the self, and that it is this dual aspect which is symptomatic of a complex dynamic between the Apollonian and the Dionysian. It is in this vein that we should regard the fact that although Foucault’s turn to the practices of the self could not avoid

\textsuperscript{194} ‘[W]e must obviously give a more positive content to what may be a philosophical ethos consisting in a critique of what we are saying, thinking, and doing’, Foucault (1984, p.45) has remarked. The positive content is significant insofar as it appears to indicate the limits of the negative approach that had spanned much of his oeuvre and which resonates with the movement of poststructuralism as a whole. There is much potential in tracing this process of complication as evidencing Foucault working through the rigour of his own thinking to destabilise some of the conclusions of his earlier work and so breaking out of the commitments of poststructuralism without sacrificing the depth of its insights. It forms a part of a much larger problematic on truth and ethics, which has seen various counter-positions to the poststructuralist project of negation manifest in critical academic discourse: aside from the return to ‘truth’ in the work of Badiou (2005), there has also been Žižek (2009) and Buck-Morss (2009).
a resort to inroads into a pre-discursive self and even to an embodied rationality, it is clearly worth preserving, and even emphasising, his sustained attack on normativity and on totalisation. His guardedness against the tendency for a ‘will to knowledge’, that the infatuation with grand abstractions leaves us ignorant about the concrete operation of power and the reality of what is crushed by power, should assist us in maintaining vigilance against, for example, any so-called ethico-aesthetic project that tries to systematise the movement of the beyond-the-self into knowledge with a normative and prescriptive orientation. The turn to ethico-aesthetics itself was, it ought to be remembered, inspired by a keenness to avoid a set of normative values or rules that would amount to a form of domination of others.

It has been said that Foucault’s ‘basic metaphor is one of battle and not conversation’ (Rabinow, 1991 [1984], p.6), and that ‘Foucault’s style mirrors the fundamental urgency of his thought, which is less to convince than to agitate, to compel a desire for flight, to afflict the reader with a pressure or force’ (Bernauer, 1990, p.6). In the end, Foucault still works in the register of ‘a utopian image of transformed social relations’, but does not elaborate on ‘the full implications of this image’, which leads to his ‘attempt to bypass the problems of the legitimation of action altogether’ (McNay, 1992, p.155). ‘Although he may reject the Enlightenment belief in a universal rationality,’ he still retains the Enlightenment notion of autonomy, ‘which is regarded as essential to a state of positive liberty, defined as the individual being able to exercise his critical judgement free from the influence of dominant desires’ (McNay, 1992, p.90). We have also seen that it has been argued that if the concept of power is to have any critical political import, there must be some principle deemed of value which power subdues or

195 I have already noted Foucault’s reliance on a notion of autonomy. There is a potential accusation that the practices of the self valorise only a particular sort of self-determination and freedom. Winifred Woodhull (1988, p.174) has argued that ‘to fight in the name of bodily self-determination, as the concept is traditionally understood, is to deny the specificity of female experience by containing it within a category of the bourgeois legal code, which, as we have seen, denies women their very existence’. Similarly, Jean Grimshaw (1993, p.69) says of Foucault that ‘his conception of a class of free beings who make works of art of their own lives is ‘always already’ premised on a distinction between those who do and those who do not have such freedoms’. In other words, it is ‘trapped in a highly masculinist view of ethics as the concern of a male elite to stylise their own lives’ (ibid., p.70). Against these objections, which lie beyond the scope of this thesis, it can be noted that there is also an intersubjective element within the practices of the self, as we have seen. Further, it is assumed here that there can be a form of self-determination that is not grounded in particular experiences or specific identity politics. Assuming that there cannot but be the fragmentation into the interests of identity groups encounters its own problems (see: McNay, 1992).
crushes; it is problematic to abstain entirely from some idea of value enshrined in
critical theory for fear of it leading to a form of domination.¹⁹⁶

This conflictedness, however, need not necessarily be seen as a failing. The
ethical task may be, in fact, to discern and to respond to the antinomy of the Dionysian
and the Apollonian as the real territory occupied by Foucault’s ethical foundations.
What would be involved in our self-transformation would be a wandering away from
ourselves, as well as a wandering towards a form of subjectivity, if it can be called that, in
accord with our embodied rationality. This would be a continuous process that, in its
destruction-creation, does not abandon ‘truth’, particularly the truth of what is to be
done in order for the work on the self to move us towards freedom, as the regulative
ideal which motivates it. I have argued that the turn to aesthetics means that there must
be the reliance on us to be able, non-cognitively, to gauge instances of the free play
between the imagination and the understanding, through capacities that are semi-
autonomous from the material context, and to presuppose that we all have such
capacities. Further, both that from which we are to wander away, and that which we are
to wander towards, bears a relationship to the present, to that which has been described
as the truth of what is real. This precludes a retreat from the forms of rationality that
exist, particularly as they are constitutive of, or even inherent in what we are. The nature
of the critique of the present should not be divorced from, but be informed by our
capacity to change the situation, or the exercise of freedom.

What Kate Soper (1991, p.128) has suggested for ‘a post-poststructural
programme’ is a ‘synthetic approach, one which combines alertness to the deficiencies
and crudeness of much traditional value-discourse with alertness to the self-defeating

¹⁹⁶ Foucault’s earlier commitment to see everything relationally prevented him from
reaching a point that could be defended, from establishing an ethical foundation. The
relational understanding of power and freedom sits ill with the notion that the operation
of power is incomplete, oppressive, and resisted through the gaps and interstices of its
operation. Nancy Fraser (1989, pp.32-33) has concluded that ‘what Foucault needs, and
needs desperately, are normative criteria for distinguishing acceptable from unaccepta-
tble forms of power.’ Similarly, McNay (1992, p.156) deems it ‘necessary’, to
‘work within some kind of normative framework’. As Sheldon Wolin (1988, p.199)
states, ‘what follows is not that we should renounce theory to avoid its dominating
discourse, rather we should find forms of theory that will be consistent with a
localising…participatory, community oriented politics.’ Habermas (1985, cited in Hoy,
1986, p.8), has complained that Foucault is a ‘crypto-normativist’, because he cannot
explain the standards that are required to condemn the present, and an ‘irrationalist’
because of his inheritance of Nietzsche’s critique of the will-to-knowledge. However,
perhaps it is this very ‘crypto-normativism’, rather than a rejection of standards
altogether, that bodes a promising potential for ethics.
quality of the attempt to avoid all principled positions in theory.’ This seems to echo
some of the core ideas of an ethico-aesthetic project, as I have described it thus far.
Thus, transcendental signifiers are submitted to the scrutiny of sceptical and relativist
appraisals in order to acquire a sense of the minimal value-commitments essential to the
critical power of social and cultural theory. This also resonates with Tanke’s proposal
that an empirical account of the trans-subjective conditions that permit or block the
activation of the imagination is required. Thus, Soper and Tanke attempt to get at the
fact that despite the necessity of having to invoke the transcendental, ethics ought to
bear a particular sort of self-correcting relation to the self-practices that forms us as
subjects as they take place. Self-constitution in computer games gives us the chance to
re-assess what it means for practices, in general, to be positive or pernicious, as well as
to consider how new modes of technologically driven self-formation fit into a broader
historical configuration of power-knowledge-subject which is nevertheless not detached
from questions of ‘truth’ or evaluative criteria.

I have put forward the controversial reading that Foucault did in fact have
certain positive commitments to what it is that power crushes, though this has been
juxtaposed with his vigilance against the intrusion of normativity and the invention of
rules. This ethical foundation to an ethico-aesthetic project, being antinomic, pertains to
the means by which we judge self-constitution, and transmits its own problematic into
the latter. The question about positive and negative self-constitution or subjectification,
about the distinction between the practices of the self and neoliberal self-fashioning,
and about our ambivalent relationship to reason, is one that we should not, in principle,
shy from attempting to answer insofar as truth has been proposed to function as a
regulative ideal. Yet the transcendental is also to be subjected to the closest scrutiny.
Foucault (2005, p.253) was concerned with the question ‘[h]ow, why, and at what cost
did we undertake to hold a true discourse on the subject?’197 This question, in a
philosophically downstream articulation that pertains to computer games, takes the
form: what is the cost of discussing the role of computer games on our subjectification,

197 It should be pointed out that Foucault was often in no two minds about the kinds of
political intervention that he himself was willing to support. Indeed, O’Leary (2002,
p.155) notes that what seemed to irk Foucault’s critics so much was that even though he
was ‘good’ in practice (he always engaged in the ‘right’ political struggles), he was so
‘naughty’ in theory (he denied both the liberal-humanist and the Marxist bases for
normative political theory’). Far from exculpating him from producing the requisite
theoretical justifications, this only further highlights the need to articulate his complex
relationship to the transcendental.
particularly in terms of the possibilities that are curbed and the resultant tendencies for us to make and to play certain kinds of games and in certain ways? The obverse of Foucault’s question, however, which warns us against rigid truth-values, is to ask about the cost of refraining from such a discourse. Thus, what is the cost of not having this discussion, or of having it and not being able to draw the sorts of evaluative comparisons needed to distinguish between games that foster practices that bring us to rethink our lives and gain some new perspectives, and those that mire us into the pursuit of goals that, in the end, feel hollow and manipulative? The way in which we adjudge the role of certain technologies, such as computer games, on our self-constitution, raises the antinomy between the Dionysian and the Apollonian, and invites our attempts to resolve it. The kinds of potentially playful and aesthetic self-formations at stake are comparatively new, and their role in realising our freedom or subjection is a matter of debate, the outcome of which shapes the technologies themselves. As such, navigating the antinomy should ward against our judgments from becoming dogmatic, but also from being untethered to the transcendental or quasi-transcendental signifiers that make critique possible.

The challenge to our ethical norms?

Given that Foucault’s position cannot be said to support either the release from repression nor the subordination of the sensuous to the moral law, the aesthetic practices of the self, understood as playful, indicate a dialectical solution that encompasses a reflective unity of self as well as a spontaneity of impulse. It is in this sense that we have a standard by which we may judge self-forming practices as positive or pernicious. This chapter has thus far led not so much to a final disambiguation as to the concretisation of a series of considerations, which may prompt us to think about the ‘rationalities’ within computer games, and the conjunction of our dispositions with them, in a new light. The use of instrumental reason in computer games, such as those that bear the structure of a calculative anticipation and deferral as a ‘rationality’, should not be prematurely identified with neoliberal self-fashioning and may, in fact, have an ineliminable role in play. However, the Schillerian framework that has been adopted still positions reason in opposition to sense, hence giving rise to the need for a mediation between them. When the disposition of a player meets the conditions on which the
practices of the self take place in a computer game, or what I have called the ‘rationalities’ within a game, and which may incline towards a form of play informed by calculative concerns, that player could well be hindered from exercising their imagination, and from experimenting with alternative possibilities. This would be due to their wanting to conform to an already preformed end to their play, and they are consequently unlikely to explore a relation to ‘truth’ via a more sophisticated relation to the ‘moral code’ at stake, i.e., one that is not primarily driven by conformity to the system of incentives and disincentives. There is a lack of the critical aesthetic interplay in which there is a circular relationship between the ends and the activities required to attain them. This kind of instrumental play, as primarily determined by clear incentives and disincentives, is something that frequently occurs in what can be said to be ‘bad’ games, where one class, or build, or strategy, is manifestly superior to the others, and where a culture of play for players does little to inculcate a ‘moral code’ that is more than about doing well or repeating already viable tactics, but may be about experimenting with niche strategies or taking risky gambles. These situations may call for forms of critical intervention to supplement any existing players’ refusal of an impoverished kind of instrumental play that takes place, particularly in the sense of rendering explicit the lack of the aesthetic interplay that ought to exist with good play.

Critical interventions will remain, however, merely cognitive appraisals of practices that produce experiences which are non-cognitive. If certain players had been preoccupied with such seemingly instrumental play, then it is not necessarily the case that one can definitively state that there was no harmonisation between sense and reason for those players. Assuming that we are committed to thinking, perhaps on the basis of our own non-cognitive experiences of playing the game in question, that there is some positive but barely articulable value to it, that it is not the result of misguided artificial longings, then this form of play can be a basis from which to call into question the Schillerian ethical foundation in the spirit of a Dionysian negation of the Apollonian. In other words, there may be a not readily apparent non-cognitive basis on which seemingly pernicious forms of practices of the self may yet bode an unconceptualisable potential, which would account for instances in which they are not rejected by players as instances of bad play – some sort of aesthetic harmony that is felt through players’ seemingly instrumental engagements that would otherwise be overlooked if critical interventions eagerly only insisted on an invective against the lack
of circularity between ends and activities following an initial analysis. Therefore, for the theorist who is inclined to make a critical intervention, and to possibly denounce the game as instantiating poor play, their stance should always be supplemented by attempting to re-examine the potential complexity of the play as lying beyond cognitive analysis; this can give rise to a newfound cognitive account for that harmony via some alternative means, and which would entail a re-assessment of our cognitive criteria themselves. The requirement to do so is not intended to preclude the validity of any intervention or critique that may spur things to be different, but merely to temper it – one can still be committed, following the process, to re-insisting that what is in question is an artificial kind of pleasure (voluptas).

However, if we are inspired into the aforementioned Dionysian negation, so that our current ethical judgments of good practices are challenged by the self-forming practices brought about by new technologies, by the non-cognitive ‘truth’ of the experience of play in those practices which do not support or instantiate them, then this kind of challenge would also have to feature a concomitant Apollonian construction of the reasoning by which this takes place. It is likely, however, that the reasoning lies just on the boundaries of our abilities to articulate or conceptualise. Yet without it, it would be perverse to maintain that there is some positive value inherent in the practices for the sole reason that players appear engrossed in the game, even though the practices themselves might appear to have no redeeming qualities. Therefore, what might result from this negation would not be the drastic abandonment of the concepts of regulative ideals, faculties, or embodied rationality, but may take the form of an alternative cognitively conveyed understanding or negotiation of the practices, and one that will itself be open to subsequent refutation on the same grounds. In this way, we may strike a balance between, on the one hand, the pitfalls of the outright dogmatic condemnation of new practices that may be poorly understood kinds of aesthetic interplay, and on the other, that of being unable to appraise the different kinds of self-construction that take place. As I have stated, self-construction marks a crucial terrain in which power and resistance play out, and which, although it is one in which these elements are ambivalently entangled, cannot be the justification for perpetual abstinence from critical

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198 Emphasising the non-cognitive qualification that attaches to a cognitive appraisal of the experience in this way is not confined to just the appraisal of the anticipation and deferral in Oblivion, but waits to be extended to other structures of ‘rationality’ in games that may be inferred through future work.
conclusions. The ethical task is to aim at the truth of what is to be done in order for the work on the self to move us towards freedom.

It has been noted that losing oneself in a game requires the identification with processes, and this is perhaps realised to its fullest extent through the harmonisation of oneself with a super-instrumentality, which may even entail a wandering away from the explicit programmes of intention in the game.\footnote{This manifested most clearly with regard to the first player type of \textit{Oblivion}, although I have also mentioned it in relation to players of \textit{Super Smash Bros. Melee}, who plumb the depths of the advanced techniques that are possible given the laws or ‘physics’ of the game. This kind of competitive approach by players, and made possible by the game, has been deemed to be inimical to the status of the game as casual, boasting a high degree of unpredictability and haphazardness, by the game’s own creator, Masahiro Sakurai.} It is characterised by the player’s rigid adherence to a plan in which every minutiae of play is evaluated for its contribution towards the player goal, which need not necessarily coincide with, as we have seen in relation to the \textit{Oblivion} typologies, the most effective way of playing. This is most notably the case with regard to the first and the third typologies.\footnote{As I have speculated in the previous chapter, the first player type may not have levelled efficiently in order to be effective, but in order for the game to reveal itself – there is a difference in the relation to self at stake between the two.} Rather than imposing our own instrumental reasoning on the game, it might be argued that we abandon our ‘everyday’ values and norms in this kind of gameplay; we leave our own dispositions, and even our embodied rationality behind, in service of what must be done in the game. Further, insofar as anticipation and deferral, even without manifesting in the extreme form of super-instrumental play, undertakes an ‘ironic heroization’ of the present, by allowing the logics of the game system to shine through undimmed, to have exaggerated them, and even to have effected a rupture of individuation via its resort to an arguably extra-individualistic mode of cognition, a case could be made for this kind of play being a transfigurative process. What was supposed to be calculative is made more so by this way of playing, just as what was natural or beautiful was made more so by Guys, according to Baudelaire. It possibly indicates a form of unreserved opening ourselves up to the particularity of the object, whatever it may be.\footnote{This idea of the opening up of the individual to the game seems to be a different kind of claim to the one that has been advanced in the thesis, which is that the way in which we play computer games arises from the conjunction between our dispositions and the structures of the game, and that these cannot be disentangled. However, the opening up need not entail a negation of our disposition, but merely a change in it, i.e., to one that is oriented towards an imbalance in favour of rationality given the lack of aesthetic interplay between the drives. The way in which we attribute the balance of...}
Nevertheless, it appears that this kind of receptiveness to the propensities of the object, as itself a disposition, if we settle on calling it this, is most certainly a dangerous one, and gestures at our willingness to be protean and transformative in a manner that comes at a high cost, that being the development and naturalisation of an ethos that may incline us to wander from the adequation between sense and reason that has been presumed to be part of us, and towards self-destructive patterns of action or to total compliance. Thus, I stress again the lack of aesthetic interplay as a cause for concern, one that has by no means been dispelled by the additional considerations that have been posited, and which has not rehabilitated the excessive role of reason in the aspiration towards a pre-formed ideal as defensible on the grounds of a concurrence between Schillerian play and Foucault’s practices of the self that makes allowance for teleological reason, though there is a balancing exercise at stake. The Oblivion player typology that has the closest correspondence to instantiating this Schillerian model is perhaps the second one, which encompasses all those players who have considered efficient levelling but compromised on realising it. These players are not disconnected from, or fail to comprehend the levelling system, as was the case in the sixth player typology, but nor are they driven by a complete conformity to a preformed ideal end either. In accordance with this model, the player of the computer game must exercise both a receptive passivity, in allowing the game to unfold and to register it in its uniqueness, but also the active and free use of their reason to discern what is to be done. In this respect, therefore, the second typology is perhaps the most aligned with aesthetic self-transformation.

Within a context of neoliberal self-exploitation, of ultra-subjectivation, we should be especially vigilant against practices that lack aesthetic interplay. It would not be misplaced, therefore, to make a case for RPGs to refrain from setting up a structure that requires players to rigidly stick to such a prescribed series of actions in order to attain an ideal. The problem for design would be how to structure gamic achievement such that it should not be without challenge, but also able to nurture an aesthetic openness among player practices as opposed to a closed kind of conformity; a parallel question for players is how to discover ascetic practices that do not eschew reason but also do not aspire to the ideal-image of calculative maximisation. However, if computer games are primarily about our identification with processes, as I have argued, about the super-instrumentality to the game (power) or the player (subject) will depend on our attitudes with regard to the orthogonal analysis; it is not an issue that I would like to close here.
forms of systems cognition and analytical learning cycles in which we internalise the system itself, then the form of wandering or transformation on offer may be first and foremost the nurturing of the kind of disposition in which we are willing to be transformative in a way that compromises the adequation between sense and reason. This might be so in a general sense even if analysis reveals that there are prominent typologies in which it is not the case, and that do not accord with the dominant rationality.
Conclusion

Computer games have already been variously argued to be ambivalent object-experiences, and this thesis has explored the ambivalence of the ascetic practices of the self that are implied by their procedural structures. I have supposed that computer games bear a close relation to the present reality, and so our questioning, criticism and analyses of them, and our relations to them, can function as a propadeutic to the larger issue of the critical ontology of ourselves. It is the ambivalence of computer games vis-à-vis the ambivalence of the forms of seemingly playful but also ascetic self-constitution that they inculcate, which raises the question of the ethical standard required at the heart of Foucault’s critique of the governmental mode of power most directly. If Foucault’s work is positioned within a wider context of the turn to ‘truth,’ we can begin to have a clearer grasp of the ground on which he based this ethico-aesthetics; I have suggested that his reliance on the body as a transcendental signifier, on concepts like ‘nature’ and ‘reason’ in his admiration of the ancient ethos of full possession of the self, commits him to a set of beliefs that will be useful with regard to considering the ambivalence of practices of self-constitution in computer games and elsewhere. The implicit ethical standard in Foucault’s work shows the tension between an ethico-aesthetic project premised on negation, and one that amounts to a positive form of self-stylisation.

The way in which the conjunction between power and the subject now functions, how the rationalities within games catalyse our dispositions, can be seen to be isomorphic with the structure of broader rationalities, which have been explored in the form of neoliberalism as the present mode of governmentality. Self-formation is now the terrain on which power and resistance plays out in the fiercest way, with very small margins of difference between that which is transformative or transfigurative and that which binds us to the individualising techniques of power. Rather than being disciplinary, there is a crucial prompting, by both neoliberalism and by the structures of the contemporary computer game, of our relation to a ‘truth’ that is non-coercive, and the fomenting of an impetus that originates from us. At the same time, I have argued that computer games are resistant to the production of discrete subjectivities, and that analyses of them must be careful as to whether there is in fact any systematic concatenation of reactions, as gauged through player typologies. They are about our
identification with processes, which are strengthened by the feedback loops in the game and by the mode of being we elect to adopt as a *hexis*, as an ethopoetic relation to ‘truth’ beyond any epistemology, rather than about our assumption of roles as soldier-citizens. Systems cognition, demystification, and the learning cycle, however, arguably steer us towards an analytical mode of being in games that veers towards a super-instrumentality, which was further explored in later chapters.

I have argued for reading computer games in terms of their inviting us to engage in practices of self-constitution, in order to account for the resultant non-coercively induced ascetic patterns of play that cohere with the formulation of players’ self-set goals. These self-practices are not divorced from the ‘rationalities’ of the game, which constitute the non-determining conditions in which the form of self-constitution or practices of the self take place. The Foucauldian tripartite mode of analysis was deemed appropriate as a means of analysing this conjunction; this thesis focused on the axis of the self as orthogonal to that of power. Such an analysis of the rationality of the game via player typologies, and so in conjunction with, rather than detached from, player dispositions, was in contrast to emphasising a single implied player, or a range of transgressive players. When applied to *Oblivion*, and on the basis of my interpreter-made player typologies, this revealed a calculative structure of anticipation and deferral. Further work in this area might involve more reflection on the axis of ‘knowledge,’ as I have indicated in chapter three. In addition, the tripartite analysis could be applied to a wider range of games in order to ascertain whether common rationalities could also be discerned between their typologies, and whether this inheres across games. The player typologies involved could also then be subjected to empirical scrutiny.

I have argued that an ethico-aesthetic project that seeks to move us towards freedom requires our being able to non-cognitively distinguish between positive and pernicious self-practices based on our embodied rationality. Asserting that there is no means to distinguish between these would conservatively cut off any enquiry, yet any resort to a rigid and overdetermined ethical standard by which to judge the matter not only risks amounting to a new form of domination, but misses the very complexity of the relations that are possible between patterns of action and the ‘moral code’. It seems to be only on the basis of the inherent truth value of our senses, mediated by reason, both of which are governed by something like Schiller’s idea of the ‘play drive’, that our efforts to self-stylise can be thought to move us towards positive transformations. This showed that the practices of the self should be observed in a way in which the end
exists in a circular relationship to the activities required to meet it, with each modulating the other: ends can be altered if actions show the possibility of an alternative end, or actions can be modified if they fail to accomplish the desired end. The turn to a Schillerian mediation returned us to the earlier conclusion, that Foucault drew on an ethical ground with transcendental signifiers, and revealed that ground to be based on the antinomy between the Dionysian and Apollonian, which lends a particular angle to the way in which we may understand the ethico-aesthetic project of his late period. This insight also provides us with some resources for disambiguating between practices in computer games without losing sight of the fact that they may in fact challenge the very separations within the mode of thinking that is applied. The anticipatory deferral, as well as a mode of super-instrumental play that constitutes its more extreme manifestation, were subjected to this disambiguation. Though there were grounds for considering the latter to be a form of wandering, and to be transformative and transfigurative, it also appeared to have a role in entrenching us in a competitive and calculative mode of being – it was the fact that the player goals were preformed, rather than resulting from an aesthetic interplay, which militated strongly against it being a force for our freedom.

I added, nevertheless, the caveat that such an understanding of good play and beneficial practices of the self cannot ossify itself as a principle, and can only be open to refutation by our non-cognitive experiences of good play, which would then prompt us to rethink the way in which reason and the senses come together in various kinds of computer game play. As such, seeking cognitive or principle-based means of adjudging practices of self-formation is necessary insofar as we may hope to avoid self-subjection, but also misplaced insofar as the critical dimension of self-formation is non-cognitive. Even though there cannot be a complete understanding of the process, or for it to be communicated transparently, there are consequences to trying to comprehend when there is a harmonious interplay between sense and reason. It may affect the kinds of games we play and make. Indeed, the presence of an antinomy in the ethical foundations necessitates the process of the creation of putative ethical rules based on cognitive understanding, which may then be collapsed by practices that go on to gesture towards new rules.
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