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Computer Gameplay and the Aesthetic Practices of the Self

Game Studies and the Late Work of Michel Foucault

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Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association
April 2018, Vol 3 No 3, pp 75-104
ISSN 2328-9422

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to critically introduce the applicability of Foucault's late work, on the practices of the self, to the scholarship of contemporary computer games. I argue that the gameplay tasks that we set ourselves, and the patterns of action that they produce, can be understood as a form of 'work on the self', and that this work is ambivalent between, on the one hand, an aesthetic transformation of the self – as articulated by Foucault in relation to the care or practices of the self – in which

we break from the dominant subjectivities imposed upon us, and on the other, a closer tethering of ourselves through our own playful impulses, to a neoliberal subjectivity centred around instrumentally-driven self-improvement. Game studies' concern with the effects that computer games have on us stands to gain from an examination of Foucault's late work for the purposes of analysing and disambiguating between the nature of the transformations at stake. Further, Foucault's tripartite analysis of 'power-knowledge-subject', which might be applied here as 'game-discourse-player', foregrounds the imbrication of our gameplay practices – the extent to which they are due to us and the way in which our own volitions make us subject to power, which is particularly pertinent in the domain of play.

Keywords

Foucault, practices of the self, care of the self, aesthetics, gameplay practices, neoliberalism, transformation, hexis, habitus, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*.

INTRODUCTION

Although much has already been made of Foucault's concept of 'discipline' with respect to computer games, very little has been said about his late work, despite the fact that it can be read as an intensification and also a complication of his earlier thoughts on discipline. In the disciplinary vein, Sal Humphreys (2008, pp. 154-5) has noted that computer games technologies have the ability to quantify, measure, differentiate and compare players' actions, which resonates with Foucault's (1991 [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.). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter began *Games of Empire* (2009) by remarking that the constitution of subjectivities at work in certain games is described as 'reassertion',

'rehearsal', and 'reinforcement'. And similarly, for Silverman and Simon (2009), the grind of the avatar levelling process exemplifies the disciplinary aspect of computer games.

In Foucault's later work, on Greek and Roman Antiquity, his studies revealed a subject that was not constituted, but involved in constituting *itself* through well-ordered practices, leading him to proclaim that 'it is not power, but the subject, which is the general theme of my research.' (Foucault 1982, p. 209) He emphasised that the subject emerged at the intersection of techniques of domination and techniques of the self, and could only be the product of historically contingent conditions (Foucault 1980, p. 117). It was by no means an unalterable substance but rather a 'form' that is capable of transformation (Foucault 1987 [1984], p. 121).

What would be involved in foregrounding Foucault's turn to the subject, with respect to the analysis of gameplay practices, would not be a straightforward emphasis on how the playing subject is able to escape the normative determinism, or disciplinary effect of the game, appropriating it to their own ends in a seemingly unfettered and creative way. It would call for a consideration of the following. First, it requires a comprehension of Foucault's synthesis of the axes that he had explored throughout his oeuvre, which he formulated into a 'tripartite' or 'orthogonal' analysis – the 'subject' is bound up with 'power' and with 'knowledge' into 'power-knowledge-self'. The subject is always to be considered in relation to power and to knowledge, not apart from them. Second, given that this fact is again captured in Foucault's explication of the concept of 'governmentality', which brings out the imbrication of the government of the self and the government of others, an examination of 'governmentality' is needed, particularly within a neoliberal context. This then leads to an important ambivalence between what Foucault called the 'cult of the self', and the care of the self, one that bears upon the nature of the transformation of the subject. Essentially, Foucault formulated a rich conceptual framework with which to consider the implications of power having become more fine-grained in its operation, bringing about the ambivalent entanglement between transforming the

self seemingly along lines that are determined from without, and transforming it seemingly in opposition to this, along lines that may be in opposition to the way in which power normatively fashions subjectivities.

This paper argues that contemporary computer games and the gameplay practices to which they give rise lend themselves to being read in terms of the practices of the self, which Foucault considered to have an aesthetic dimension. The two points mentioned above will be engaged with in the course of this paper, although they do not define its structure, which will be as follows. The first section dwells on the aesthetic practices of the self, otherwise known as the care of the self or the transformation of the self. It will be seen that the positive transformations denoted here – the subject is regarded as breaking from the subjectivities that are imposed upon them – stand in contrast to a potentially pernicious kind of neoliberal self-fashioning, which is a self-transformation nonetheless. The second section will articulate three broad assumptions that would be required in order to bring out the significance of seeing gameplay practices as a form of work on the self. Given that the assumptions themselves are not explicitly rooted in Foucault's work, this move shows that it is not that one needs to be a committed Foucauldian theorist to asseverate that a slow transformation of the self is involved with gameplay practices, but that the commitment to this transformation thesis via the assumptions reveals the relevance of his late work. The engagement with gameplay practices as aesthetic practices of the self should allow for the interpretation of findings that need not be limited by the Foucauldian framework, but may in fact have the potential to be corrective of it. The third section will consider some possible objections to the application of the practices of the self to gameplay practices, together with some thoughts about the category of the 'aesthetic'. The fourth section will briefly cover a game example that instantiates the kind of analysis that is being advanced, together with its attendant complexities.

This paper only has the scope to sketch out a rather introductory foray into considering computer gameplay practices as individualising practices of the self. More extensive arguments that arise organically from these theoretical commitments will have to be omitted due to the limitations of space. In particular, I have proposed elsewhere that Foucault's study into the practices of the self in Antiquity yielded some means for non-dogmatically distinguishing between positive and pernicious kinds of practices, which would inform us with respect to deciding between the aesthetic practices of the self and neoliberal self-fashioning (Zhu 2016). The more modest claim being made here, in contrast, is that by using a Foucauldean framework of the practices of the self, we are better suited to perceiving the player's self-construction as an accumulated process in which the player acquires a *hexis* or mode of being through their own voluntary actions within the historical context of the dangers posed by neoliberal self-fashioning. Our attention ought to be fixed upon the ambivalence between this neoliberal self-fashioning and the aesthetic practices of the self; the question of the means of disambiguation must be bracketed for now.

THE AESTHETIC PRACTICES 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. These transformative practices have been called 'the practices of the self', or 'the care of the self'. 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 citizen 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). As Deleuze remarked, the great novelty of the Greeks was that the ‘‘exercises that enabled one to govern oneself’ become detached both from power as a relation between forces, and from knowledge as a stratified form, or ‘code’ of virtue’ (Deleuze 1999 [1988], p. 83).

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 1980, 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). It was not the seeking of a final truth, or the adherence to strict 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 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 task of transforming ourselves involves a philosophical ethos that may be described as the imaginative, creative attempt to surpass our limits (Foucault 1984, p. 47). Foucault suggests that the whole point of writing or reading his books is to try to detach oneself from oneself, or even to ‘disassemble the self’ (1988 [1984], p. 8). The knowing subject does not know for the sake of knowing, but in order to stray

afield from himself (Foucault 1988 [1984], p. 8). This 'straying afield' is, in French, *égarement*, which means, quite literally, a 'wandering'. 'There must be no global implications in the historico-critical analysis of identity', Foucault proclaimed; 'we must confine ourselves to specific transformations.' (Foucault 1984, pp. 46-7) The advantage of such an approach, characterised by its eschewal of a determinate destination, was the difficulty for this to be co-opted by new power relations or grand projects. The *aesthetic* exploration of new modes of subjectivity that was founded in an attitude of self-critique (see: McNay 1992, p. 87) suggested a way out of the cycle, insofar as it was possible, by which 'successful' resistance is transformed into domination when it becomes victorious and solidifies into a power complex that provokes a new counter-power.

That there can be no codified or determined end to self-transformation (see: Bernauer and Mahon 2005, p. 163) does not mean that resistance, which avoids totalising tendencies, must itself be formless and indeterminate. 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* (1987 [1790]), 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. It is not necessary to subscribe to a theory of artistic genius to establish a thesis concerning the workings of the aesthetic, but only to 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. In other words, 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)

In view of the above, it may be asked whether computer gameplay practices could be thought to involve a series of exercises in which the player does not follow a strict code or final truth in deciding their actions, such as to lead to a kind of 'wandering' with the aforementioned ethico-aesthetic consequences. In other words, could gameplay practices be conducive to this kind of aesthetic subjectivity? Certain kinds of gameplay could perhaps be described as self-set, vigilant and careful activity, such as when a player seeks to comb through for all the Easter eggs, scouring every nook and cranny, albeit not strictly being required to do so to complete the game. And perhaps the habit of a daily duel with an opponent in *Magic Duels* (Stainless Games 2015), for example, for the purposes of keeping one's coin balance and playing skills topped up, could be compared with regular forms of work on the self in Antiquity. The broader significance of gameplay practices as a form of aesthetic work on the self will be addressed in the next section, in which I will propose that many 'contemporary' games, such as *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD 2017), 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, constituting an asceticism that sits oddly with computer games' cultural status as non-serious works.

THREE ASSUMPTIONS

I propose that three broad assumptions are required in order to sharpen the significance of seeing certain gameplay practices as a form of work on the self. Firstly, that there has been a shift in contemporary computer games, such that they suggest or imply practices to us in the course of our engagements with them, rather than demanding a particular set of practices (such as with the example of finding all the Easter eggs); secondly, that our adoption of these practices in a prolonged manner has the effect of transforming or shaping ourselves through slow work or

a process of accumulation and sedimentation; and thirdly that there are similarities in the practices and patterns of action across different games, so that the effects in question are, in many cases, not incommensurate with one another but are in fact synchronised despite surface differences. One does not need to be a Foucauldean theorist to commit to these assumptions. Indeed, the structure of the argument here is that if one *does* commit to these, then it is but a short step to acknowledging that Foucault's writings on the practices of the self can be illuminating on this topic – the ordering here is crucial.

Contemporary computer games suggest practices

The first assumption is that contemporary computer games emphasise suggesting or implying practices, rather than demanding them for progression. This is a broad claim about the shift in games that has occurred with their development, and which has been driven by design ideologies that emphasise player choice. That is to say, the shift concerns not only games in themselves, but also the way they are talked about, and the way we try to play them. As director of *Breath of the Wild*, Hidemaro Fujibayashi, says:

> 'It's up to you how you play *Breath of the Wild*…There will be players who might gather lots of food and potions to recover hearts and stamina, so they can recover from any mistake. Other players might try to overcome difficulty by improving and strengthening their clothing and equipment…Some may rely on their bow-and-arrow technique and complete the game wearing just underwear.' (cited in Schilling 2017, p. 67)

Edge Magazine summarises that 'players exert a degree of control over the challenges they face in accordance with their individual play styles – and Fujibayashi is well aware that will include an audience that would rather raise the difficulty than lower it.' (Schilling 2017, p. 67)

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 invite more than one skill-driven path through them. What I indicate here is a differentiation between, on the one hand, games that increase in difficulty in a linear progression and in which all players start from the same point with identical resources at their disposal, and on the other, those that are premised on fostering difference at the very outset (even from character creation), to inculcate a great deal of divergence between different players and play styles. This distinction reveals itself perhaps most clearly with regard to role-playing games (RPGs), in which various classes play very differently to one another – a fact that is exacerbated by the way in which players choose to level up their character, such that a Destruction school mage in the Elder Scrolls series will require a style that bears little resemblance to a Conjuration school mage.

The gamic or ludic freedom that is associated with the latter, however, is often over-exaggerated; there is much more convergence in gameplay than the marketing discourse makes out. Further, I refrain from suggesting that there has been some historical or technological 'break' after which computer games are best described as 'contemporary' and nonlinear. Older platform games, for example, often did not require the player to complete the level only via one possible route; there were hidden areas and shortcuts scattered throughout the levels, as well as entire levels that could be unlocked that would otherwise have been passed by. It is nevertheless worth noting here that many analyses of gaming history tend to steer towards imparting a localised account of the origins and development of particular design features. This kind of fine-grained attention, however, may miss more effusive overarching changes; the broad and tentative claim being made here is that the game industry discourse about games, and the way in which resources have been invested in their technological development, have both seen an emphasis on players being able to play the game in their own way, and that this is true of sizeable sectors of the game market. The result has been the opening up of possibilities of playing through self-setting certain limitations and challenges, such as not using more than one party member, or disallowing various weapons and armour. As computer

games have matured as a medium, we have adopted a more connoisseurial and reflexive orientation towards them, seeking to play them transgressively, or hoping that they give opportunity to express our individuality.

This argument about the work on the self cannot be confined to the question of what games are on a purely formal or ontological level, nor to how players choose to play them, and nor, indeed, to the broader cultures of creation and reception that delimit which games are made and how those games are approached. That is to say, this is not a theory that is motivated to critique, in isolation, the deficiencies of the games that exist, the ways in which we play them, or the manner in which we discuss them as being artefacts of a particular class. There is a messy and intersecting terrain between, in brief, explicit design ideologies, the formal structures of the game, the dispositions that we bring to the game as players, and the interpretive and cultural discourse around games.[1] For Foucault, the triple axes of 'power-knowledge-self' were inseparable from one another, and might be loosely understood here as corresponding to: 'formal game structure-game discourse-player disposition'. As I have noted above, he referred to this as the 'tripartite analysis', or 'orthogonal analysis'. Our gameplay practices take the form that they do due to the *conjunction* of all of these elements. Nevertheless, the balance between these is a matter for the interpreter; one axis may be accorded greater comparative weighting depending on the task at hand and what it is that the analysis is supposed to achieve given its justifications. This should not, however, lead the interpreter to forget the other axes or to fail to justify why they have been given comparative inattention.

Therefore, the 'suggestion' that flows from the formal features of the game in question to the player, where it does not strictly decide what is required to progress the game, cannot be understood as a determination,

1. Cf. Kirkpatrick (2011, p. 99), who proposed that the 'form' of the game is something that neither the player nor the game can claim possession of; instead, it lies somewhere at the intersection of player and game, subject and object.

but nor is it an open-ended set of possibilities without its own force or implicit direction. A strict determination, such that our only real option would be to refrain from playing altogether, would preclude us from developing our own practices. However, if there were no directive or force to prompt our practices that originates from the game itself, then any resultant analysis would hardly need to take into account the game as opposed to just the players of the game. Therefore, it is more accurate to say that the practices that we choose to adopt in the course of our play stem from the conjunction between what we bring to the game, the culture of reception, and that of the terms set by the game. The complexities of the player-game relationship have already received much attention (cf. Nicoll 2016; Eskelinen 2012; Kirkpatrick 2011). My argument here is that this complexity is especially interesting in certain cases: that of contemporary computer games in which the player is encouraged to develop their own style of play.

With contemporary games, there is often 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 even 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, shorter-term goal, whilst the original goal 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 have implications for what may be called one's relation to self.[2] The player is incentivised to think for themselves as part of the play experience, to be creative and to express themselves.[3] As such, the activities undertaken

2. 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.
3. 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)

are voluntary, and engender further activities that are even more remote and unforeseeable with regard to surface gamic structures, but this does not preclude them from being amenable to the tripartite analysis.

Computer games are transformative

The second assumption is that these practices transform us, that they do something to us. This transformation is not best captured as a kind of sudden artistic epiphany that profoundly changes us, but as a slow accumulation. As stated, this is encapsulated by the concept of '*askesis*'. There are obvious resonances here with the Marxist idea that labour is a process in which human beings shape themselves. In contrast, play has often been conceived as being removed from far-reaching implications given that it is thought to take place within a consecrated space (Huizinga 2001 [1949]; Salen and Zimmerman 2004).[4] On this point of 'labour' being distinct from 'play', one can turn to an intermediate concept, such as 'craft' (Sennett 2008; Liboriussen 2013), to indicate the idea that a gameplay practice can be situated outside the domain of labour, but also be transformative in the slow manner attributed to the labour hypothesis, i.e., that it may be read as a craft. Indeed, Liboriussen has noted that '[u]nderlying Sennett's book on craftsmanship is a Marxist understanding of labour as a process through which the human being shapes itself' (2013, pp. 274-5). Further, the craft dimension bears associations of a blurring of the boundaries between object and subject, which is brought out in the Greek term *techne* – one that is also involved in the work on the self as a crafting of the self along aesthetic lines. Aristotle's definition of *techne* involved the idea that a human-made artefact could have an essence that was only realisable through a skilled practitioner. An alternative to the above view of craft occupying an intermediate territory between work and play, with gameplay practices being a form of craft, which has the result of locating craft lower on the transformative hierarchy to work, is the idea that there is a common

4. Others, however, have argued for a 'gap' in the 'magic circle' of play (see, for example: Bogost 2006, p. 135).

shared ingredient between play and work: what is actually transformative in labour can also be found in activities that share those constituent ingredients, including repetitive and skilful forms of play. That is to say, there is a demiurgic aspect to both.[5]

The transformations at stake here are more profound than simply getting better at realising the specific *telos* of the object (the player getting better at the specific game in question) – what is designated is a transformation of one's very subjectivity. Here, Foucault's understanding of self-transformation stems from a long tradition that includes the notion of *hexis*, which Aristotle interpreted to mean 'a state of character' that is more enduring than a mere disposition (Categ. 8b 27-28 in Aristotle 2012). *Hexis* is 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'* (Aristotle, cited in Han 2002, p. 160). Following its translation into the Latin term *habitus*, and a period of disuse, it has come to have a much narrower application – one associated with 'habit' (Hutchinson 1986). *Habitus* is now most notably connected with the work of Bourdieu, who sought to articulate a mode of being. Although the parameters of the term are still being contested, it has stronger associations with passivity than did Aristotle's *hexis*. The concept of a 'gamer *habitus'* (Kirkpatrick 2012; Crawford 2012) has been applied to computer games in the sense of the skills required to unlock the sensations that they have to offer, although it is possible to extend this to capture a wider range of transformations pertaining to a special sort of 'disposition' amongst gamers that directs our feelings and desires in a situation, and thus influences our choices.[6]

5. Such an ethico-political claim about the relationship between transformation and practice cannot be collapsed into the concerns about 'playbour' (Kücklich 2005) and the connections posited between play, work, and consumption today. However, it is because there is overlap that the latter pivot on the encroachment of exploitation

6. The concept of *habitus* also brings out some complexities orbiting the boundaries of the intentional and the non-intentional. Briefly stated, there can be much discussion over the

For Aristotle, a *hexis* is either an excellence or an aberration (Hutchinson 1986, p. 5). Returning now to the concept of 'neoliberal self-fashioning', I argue that we cannot hope to obtain an adequate grasp on the nature and significance of the transformations, as excellences or aberrations, unless we recognise the existing historical context. A wide range of theorists have emphasised that the present context of this kind of transformation is one in which the subject works on themselves in an instrumental manner (Dardot and Laval 2013; Baerg 2009), which can be designated as neoliberal self-fashioning. If the work on the self was taking the self as a work of art, as a thing to be crafted and laboured upon, then with neoliberal self-fashioning, we can envisage a more instrumental approach, geared towards maximisation and optimisation. Dardot and Laval have described the neoliberal, entrepreneurial self, as an 'ultra-subjectivation', whose goal is not a final, stable condition of ethical 'self-possession', but a beyond the self that is aligned with the logic of enterprise and market valorisation as self-valorisation (2013, p. 284). The onus for change and responsibility is placed on the self by the rhetoric of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, as Nealon (2008, p. 13) argues, 'is dedicated to the economization of artistic self-creation as a strategy for resisting normativity: that style of subjectivity has in fact become American-style neoliberalism's primary engine and product line'. Our energies for work on the self are channelled by the entrepreneurial self into predefined categories that exist in discourse, which leads to greater self-exploitation than that which was born only out of economic

relative consciousness or degree of intentionality involved in the transformation. On the one hand, it is clearly not true that we *only* transform ourselves when we consciously set out to do so. On the other, some degree of volition and understanding is often required in order to steer change in a particular direction, rather than resulting in various practices that produce a myriad of incommensurate effects. It is true that the practices and exercises for achieving self-mastery favoured by the Stoics and others that Foucault described all have an element of deliberative wilfulness and care about them (see: White 1985; O'Leary 2002). However, given the complexity of deducing what is strictly 'intentional', this does not foreclose the possibility that practices may be considered to be practices of the self in a different historical context, and not line up perfectly with the intentions associated with Stoicism, for example. Certain practices may be *non*-consciously organised by a subject to produce predictable results that seem almost intentional. The concept of *habitus* is able to capture some of these complexities (see: Hutchinson 1986; Lizardo 2004).

necessity insofar as this channelling, being more self-driven than merely material inducements, can further reinforce the motivations for one's actions.[7]

Not all transformations are subsumable under this kind of neoliberal self-fashioning. There are difficulties, nonetheless, with regard to decidability. Assuming that we are committed to seeing the operation of power as now more diffuse than ever, acknowledging such ambivalence is itself unsurprising. On the new imbrication of self and power, Foucault has 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 procedures.' (Foucault 1982, p. 213) He was not unaware that the new kind of aesthetic subjectivity which was required, and as outlined earlier, could not merely be individualising, since the State was precisely the matrix of individualisation, being simultaneously totalising and individualizing (Foucault 1982, p. 216). He famously observed, concerning the California cult of the self, which he witnessed 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)

As I have stated, my task here is not to attempt to dissolve this ambivalence, but to propose that the entanglement between neoliberal self-fashioning and the aesthetic practices of the self is central to the way in which computer games transform us. That is to say, to consider the

7. We can disconnect this point from some of the difficulties of attempting to define 'neoliberalism' itself since what is gotten at here is neoliberal *subjectivity* as characterised by instrumentality and self-exploitation.

operation and limitations of the present form of power. Foucault defined 'governmentality' as a form of power that has come to pre-eminence over all other forms, and which is precisely the 'surface of contact on which the way of conducting individuals and the way they conduct themselves are intertwined.' (Gros 2001, p. 548) It is 'the encounter between techniques of domination exercised over others and techniques of the self.' (Foucault 2001, p. 1604), and the 'surface of contact on which the way of conducting individuals and the way they conduct themselves are intertwined.' (Gros 2001, p. 548)[8] The 'intensification' of power, leading to techniques of governmentality that rely on freedom as their condition of operation, means that the present form of power relies more than ever on the volitional actions of subjects, and is also subject to being thwarted by those actions. Thus, to re-iterate, the second assumption is that we have to understand any accumulated transformation of the subject as existing within, and with reference to, this historical context and its attendant ambivalence. This is to underscore the point that the consequences of self-transformation are far from transparent, but also that worthwhile analyses should ultimately set themselves the aim of trying to work through and beyond 'ambivalence' as an endpoint, as a block to further understanding. Thus, an analysis of a particular game, whilst recognising this ambivalence, should nonetheless attempt to congeal into new perspectives on the complex relation between freedom and power, and into proposals (albeit without definitive 'global implications') for facilitating transformative wanderings.

Similar gameplay practices are spread across different games

The third assumption is that there are similarities in the practices between different games. We are liable to spend a considerable amount of time playing a range of games in which similarities can be adduced

8. See also the definition given in (Foucault 2007, p. 108).

between the practices which are involved in playing them and which are suggested by them. The issue of discerning the particular similarities and differences between games would of course involve some long discussions concerning genre and of breaking games down into their constituent parts, but it is surely uncontroversial to hold that there are an ample number of similarities to motivate this kind of analysis, regardless of whether we take the narrower position that they only exist with respect to certain games within the same genre, or a wider position that looks for broader resonances across genres and even gaming epochs. For one to hold this third assumption, it is sufficient to commit to the belief that there can be similarities between practices amongst different games; it is not necessary to show exactly and exhaustively in which respects game *x*'s implied practices resemble or differ from those of game *y*.

For the ancients, the various exercises involved in the practices of the self, which constituted a continuous project or way of life, could all be directed towards the same goal: self-mastery (*enkrateia*, *chrēsis*, etc.). The significance of this assumption is that our repetitive actions in different games may, as with the aforementioned exercises, have a cumulative and even synchronised effect with one another; they are not necessarily divorced or isolated such that the minute transformations perpetuated in us from one is incommensurate with those from another. This claim also opens up the possibility that repetitive actions and practices *external* to games may also either contribute towards or counter the effects in question. That is to say, the question that follows on from recognising commensurability is: how are we to decide the impact of particular practices, positive or negative, on the accumulation of a certain *hexis*? This is a broader issue than I can address in this paper, as it bears on fundamental questions about disambiguation. But more than disambiguation as to whether it is neoliberal self-fashioning or the aesthetic practices of the self that is inculcated, there is a question concerning the converging tributaries of diverse practices towards the development of a single *hexis*, or 'disposition', i.e., the way in which we group and categorise practices. In which respects, for example, do action *a* and action *b* both contribute to the solidification of a singular

hexis Z? And in which respects are they conducive to different *hexeis* that possibly undermine one another or exist entirely independently of each other?

It is of course a possibility that computer gaming practices and practices *external* to computer games may align towards the same *hexis.* Against this view, one might counter that the specificity of gestural interactions with controllers, together with the player's naturalised response to screen stimuli, should not be overlooked insofar as they require a rather specific bodily *hexis* that is often unlikely to match up with practices external to computer gaming. This view is of course far from conclusive; the requisite task is to search for similar structures or patterns of action, and then to continuously consider the manner by which they are grouped.[9] That is to say, we might want to look for similar structures of action that underlie diverse gameplay practices, which would enable us to think about what may be homogeneous beneath apparent heterogeneity. There arises the question of how we are to ascertain these structures: what is it, if anything, that unites gaming practices such that when we refer to them collectively as 'gaming', and regard them as a type of activity with certain commonalities? Further research may attempt to refine the philosophical bases with which we come to consider subordinate actions under broader structures that then come to constitute a *hexis*. This considerable task is detachable from the commitment that there *are* similarities in the practices between different games, and that the more these 'structures' of actions are repeated, the more far-reaching may be their effects, i.e., we can hold these latter beliefs without having a definitive means of categorisation.

The above are what I think the underlying assumptions have to be in order to advance the argument. First, this raises the prospect of a transformation of the self, not through some sudden epiphany or shock, but as a result of slow practices that are accumulated in a way that

9. I use 'structures' here to denote the necessary move towards thinking of the non-specificity of gameplay practices – it is this conceptual move which enables us to consider them with the degree of abstraction that would allow us to perceive generalities.

constitutes one's *hexis* or disposition. Second, a relevant exercise would be to examine these relations to self as evidenced by practices within the context of neoliberalism, as it is understood to foster a particular kind of relation to self. This calls for a framework with which we can adjudge whether the transformation is an 'excellence', freeing us from entrenched modes of being, or an 'aberration', tying us to identities from which we would rather extricate ourselves. Thirdly, we are called to scrutinise the similarities between gameplay practices across different games in terms of the sedimentation of a relation to self, and to pose the question as to the way in which we might group certain practices under a single umbrella.

CRITIQUES OF THE APPLICABILITY OF FOUCAULT

I turn now to two possible criticisms against the argument in this paper. Firstly, Foucault obviously never wrote about computer games, nor gave their emergence any serious thought. Why then, should there be any affinity between his thought and the analysis of gameplay practices? Crucially, he emphasised that the process of self-formation involves the person being active, and that the 'way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject' (Foucault, 1982, 208), or 'subjectification', is becoming more prominent, with implications which have yet to be fully explored. There were new opportunities arising from the decline in the grand narratives of religion and politics, which have opened up a space for a modern aesthetics of existence (Foucault 1988, pp. 49-50). We can certainly situate new technologies within the new social possibilities for self-construction. It is from here that we can consider the implications of computer games. That is to say, contemporary games can be understood to be symptomatic of a series of much broader transitions in the operation of power that were very much the focus of Foucault's work.

Secondly, it must be recognised that not everyone plays games as a way of *consciously* working on or crafting the self as a work of art. In his examination of Antiquity, the practices of the self were outlined by

Foucault as part of a conscious way of living, in which the practitioner is vigilant and stoical with regard to their commitment to the art of the self (see: endnote 6, in which I comment on the boundaries between the intentional and the non-intentional). For gamers, such vigilance would seemingly be with respect to achieving goals in the game itself, and the seriousness of the attitude perhaps makes hardcore, competitive gamers the most relevant group. However, I propose that this is too narrow a perspective: although there are no doubt many gamers who play loosely and 'casually', we ought not limit our attention here to those competitive gamers that restrict their gameplay practices because they want to do well, but also include gamers who have goals that take serious effort, such as acquiring all the pieces for an outfit that is non-optimal in combat, but that have the appearance that the gamer desires – this may involve no less planning and effort than a goal set by the gamer bent on optimisation. Further, there is often no firm distinction between these various kinds of gamers; a 'casual' gamer may graduate into such an outfit hunter and then into a competitive kind of player in the course of a single playthrough. There is a spectrum of intersecting player typologies and behaviours such as to muddle firm distinctions between those for whom the work on the self may be appropriate and those for whom it may not. This is not to say that there is no value in distinguishing between player typologies and behaviours, but only that there is difficulty in trying to dismiss a discrete group of players as irrelevant to this analysis.

The point of play style and conscious intention bears on a key issue concerning the concept of the 'aesthetic'. With regard to gameplay practices, as players, we tend to choose consistent patterns of action, such as being a min-maxing 'super-instrumental' kind of player, with the effect of producing a certain work upon our own subjectivities. We might modify those patterns depending on the results, and whether the work is turning out as we would want. In creating a work of art, since there is the Kantian idea that no determinate rules can be followed, there must be a *to-and-fro* process, in which the artist constantly reviews whether each additional action, such as a new brushstroke, contributes to their

intuition of the overall whole. But here lies a potential incompatibility with certain gameplay practices. The ancient practices of the self called for the review of the effects of one's practices, often with the help of a philosophical teacher or guide, albeit not someone who dogmatically instructs. In cases of failed work on the self, in which the end result is not 'beautiful' (*kalos*), we might surmise that there was a lack of such reviewing; Foucault gives some humorous examples, for example, of those who got carried away with athletics and bodybuilding, to the detriment of other areas, which skewed their work on the self. Again, this is related to the mindfulness and intentionality (the to-and-fro aspect) with which the practices of the self were pursued, and perhaps to the comparative lack thereof within varieties of gameplay. With gameplay, whilst there may often be a tendency to review whether each action contributes to the goal set by the player, the player's own subjectivity and desired development is often not self-reflected upon. This omission does not mean that we should be mindful of gameplay practices by steering them towards particular goals regarding the self that we want – that would be rather calculated, and thwart the possibility of wandering and getting lost. There is room, however, for gaming culture to accommodate further reflection on the self in relation to gameplay, to facilitate players to do so, and for games that inculcate this to be made. To this end, what is needed is attentiveness to the nebulous zone between instrumentally desiring certain goals (which is dogmatic), and the lack of an overall order or coherence (in which we risk being subject to our immediate impulses without an overarching guide). This area, occupying the space between over-determination and under-determination, has traditionally been the domain of the aesthetic and of aesthetic theories.[10]

10. Indeed, a question that arises is this: if instrumentalised, strictly min-maxing play is compulsive, can it be made to give way to the above aesthetic reviewing, this to-and-fro process, to turn into gameplay practices that leads to the subject wandering away from themselves? Are there instances in which it contains the latter as a potentiality residing within itself?

GAME EXAMPLES

This paper has, as stated, the aim of arguing for the theoretical relevance of Foucault's late work to game studies. It is too constrained by space to be able to focus upon an extended case study. Elsewhere, however, I have used the example of *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda 2009) and the way in which players might approach levelling up (Zhu 2016, chpt. 4). Only a short exegesis is possible here. Amidst the different possible playstyles, we may formulate some broad player typologies, of which the 'Attribute maximiser', who levels up with the aim of getting the maximum of 5 to three different Attributes each time, is one. To do this, a great deal of planning, repetition, and the timely *proscription* of using certain Skills is required. It is by no means required to complete the game or to complete any of the quests in the game; many players will have given it no thought at all. It will lend itself to consideration by those players who are curious about the significance of the numbers involved in the level up screen, and who desire to fashion their character to be the strongest that they can, regardless of the effort involved. This is a style of play that seems to fall foul of accusations of instrumentality (and neoliberal self-fashioning). Every game action, be it a swing with a bladed weapon, or a cast of a heal spell, has an impact on what is levelled, and so must be scrutinised. Crucially, to level up well, one needs to refrain from using certain Skills during planned character levels, saving them for later levelling. To do so involves a certain difficulty if one really needs to use the Restoration Skill to heal after a fight, or the Illusion Skill to become invisible and elude enemies, and so on.

This is surely not the way the game was intended to be played. In this way, this 'super-instrumental' way of playing is arguably transgressive, and due, ironically, to its very intemperance or immoderation. Consequently, it might facilitate a form of 'wandering' for the player who persists with it, but who eventually comes to find the ordeal of maximisation ridiculous, or who has various non-standard experiences due to the lengths they have to go to. In this way, it is not obvious that this is a banal, readily consumable experience. In contrast to this,

there is no shortage of RPGs that do trade in much more standardised forms of experiences, and which do not call for such an extreme kind of super-instrumentality. It should be noted, however, that this kind of delayed gratification or anticipatory deferral is a relatively common gamic structure, so it is possible that the work on the self through a hundred hours or so of gameplay is consonant with the work that we do in another game, particularly another RPG. Further, there will be a spectrum of various kinds of player engagement, many of which will tend or gravitate towards, but fall some distance short of this super-instrumental approach and the pull it exerts.

On this analysis, there is an ambivalence between, on the one hand, this being play that is approached with, and that also induces, an instrumental and laborious mentality, and there being, on the other hand, a potential transformation in which the mechanics of the game eventually come to be perceived as absurd by the player, leading to a reflection on the player's whole enterprise of playing in such a way and a shift into alternative gameplay practices. If the latter obtains, then *all* the gameplay practices performed up until that point could potentially be seen as having been done in service of the aesthetic practices of the self, as having paved the way for it. Alternatively, other lines of analysis are possible. The instrumental mentality that is induced may even have positive outcomes for the player, leading to a sense of empowerment beyond the game and a readiness to deal with difficulties, rather than merely the fashioning into a self-exploiting neoliberal subject. Here, we may refer to numerous claims that have been made for the efficacy of gameplay in terms of rendering one a superior manager, business person, leader, etc. (see: Beck and Wade 2004; Carstens and Beck 2005). These have in common the perceived transferability of skills between play and work, which may be understood in terms of the fashioning of the ideal neoliberal subject, although we may also be inclined to attribute more to these transformations than merely what is narrowly required to improve one's work performance, i.e., that there is an 'excess' that shades into the aesthetic work on the self. The precise contours of this have been examined in more detail elsewhere (Zhu 2016, chpt. 5); my purpose

here is to sketch out the possible directions of analyses that follow from foregrounding gameplay as a transformative work on the ambivalent nature of the individualisation techniques involved.

CONCLUSION

The claims made so far can be briefly summarised as follows: certain gameplay practices can be seen as a work on the self, and three assumptions are needed to underpin the significance of this claim. Firstly, contemporary computer games suggest practices, such that players set their own goals without being completely determined to do so. Secondly, computer games transform us through a slow *askesis* with implications for our *hexeis*, or modes of being. Thirdly, similar gameplay practices across different games may come together to bring about and reinforce this transformation. The work on the self at stake has the potential to be an aesthetic labour or craft that leads us to wander into unanticipated subjectivities and away from the subjectivities that are imposed upon us by power, but can also be an instrumental process in which we harden into the subjects demanded by governmental power. One need not be a committed Foucauldean theorist to hold to any of these views, although they collectively point towards the direction of his late work.

There are numerous repercussions that follow from viewing gameplay practices as a work on the self. The invocation of the category of the aesthetic allows for us to comprehend possible vectors of resistance as transformation without ossifying them; we are equipped to resist any rigid denunciation of computer games as producing discrete effects without barring the notion that some practices may be ultimately pernicious; and space is also opened up for investigating the complex connectedness between subject and object, or more expansively, the tripartite of subject-power-knowledge in the transformation of the subject. What is ultimately at stake here is reflection on the issue of philosophy as a way of life and as instantiated in ethico-aesthetic practices within the domain of gameplay practices.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Graeme Kirkpatrick for introducing me to Foucault's late work. My thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful suggestions. Much of this research was done during the course of my Ph.D., which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the University of Manchester President's Doctoral Scholar Award (PDS).

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