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Trauma, Accumulation, and Ethical Action in Affective-Immersive Gaming

Joanna Rhonwyn Cuttell

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of Warwick, Department of Sociology, November 2016
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I am grateful to the Department of Sociology, the Sir Richard Stapley Educational Trust, and Funds for Women Graduates, whose generous bursary and grants (respectively) have enabled this research to take place.

I acknowledge the rigorous advice, masterful guidance, and unfailing support – always generously given – of my supervisors. Deborah Lynn Steinberg has championed this work, offered encouragement when I was struggling to believe in it or myself, and provided critical insight enabling me to see through the fogs of research. Amy Hinterberger’s great capacity for rigour and reassurance helped focus and stabilise this project. I also thank Nickie Charlies for her assistance in the final stages of this thesis.

My thanks to Monae Verbeke, Jim Russell, Peta Cuttell, Kirsty Lohman, Ruth Pearce, and Laura Tucker for their assistance in proof-reading this thesis. I am very grateful to Dr Marianna, who changed my life. To all my colleagues and friends both within and without the sociology department who have supported me over the course of this thesis, I say a massive thank you. Especially the teaching team I have been lucky enough to work with over the last four years, and all my past students.

A big thank you to all my family, especially my parents Jeff and Elizabeth Cuttell. Also my grandad, my parents- and siblings-in-law, and Naomi White. Thanks to my sister, Peta Cuttell – Tails to my Sonic, Elsa to my Anna, and gaming co-conspirator.

I wish to acknowledge the contributions of Fudge, Mr Topper, Fezziwig, Piggie D. Luffy, Col. Pyjpers, Haku, and President Teddy (guinea pigs) for being my little companions throughout this endeavour. Also, Jack the dog for helping me recover after my miscarriage.

And finally, this work could not have taken place if not for the love, support, and tolerance of Jim Russell. Over the many years of this project there have been times when you have had to encourage, carry, and drag me through. Thank you for being my loudest champion and my fiercest ally. Thank you for never moaning about how much time I spend gaming. Thank you for loving me.
Declarations

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It has been composed by myself and has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

I have published parts of this thesis in journals, papers presented at conferences, and on academic websites:


Abstract

This thesis interrogates the relationship between the researcher and immersive media ecology through developing an immersive-participatory method which builds on autoethnography and makes central the researcher's experience. It theorises immersion during gameplay as an affective, embodied state, which is both active and passive, and achieved via visual engagement, projective identification, and haptic communication with the player character and game world. Deploying a mode of qualitative content analysis alongside this immersive method, this project makes visible and utilises the relationship between the researcher and the object of study. As such, it attains critical purchase on the affective and embodied experience of narrative, immersive and mechanic game elements.

Three overarching themes have emerged from this research: the affective and persuasive elements of immersive engagement; the players’ ability to agentfully negotiate the freedoms and constraints of the gameworld; and the ideological positioning of the player within certain subjectivities. In order to examine these themes, I interrogate three narrative and mechanical branches which are common to the games studied. Firstly, how trauma, vulnerability and spectacle are deployed within game narratives and structures, and how they serve to attach the player and motivate them to overcome and master. Secondly, the way (bio)dystopian game worlds and mechanical incentivisation of accumulation work at cross purposes to both express anxieties about late-capitalist ideologies whilst also structuring player desire along neoliberal lines. And finally, the evocation of ethical response through ‘moral’ game mechanics and the space for players to interpret, negotiate, and play with ethical acts.

In following these lines of analysis, this thesis reveals broader cultural tensions surrounding identification, immersion, and knowledge specifically regarding questions of affect, desire, and ethical decision-making.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviations</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AAA</td>
<td>triple A</td>
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<tr>
<td>AI</td>
<td>artificial intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDD</td>
<td>body dysmorphic disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGI</td>
<td>computer-generated imagery</td>
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<tr>
<td>DLC</td>
<td>downloadable content</td>
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<tr>
<td>FP</td>
<td>first-person</td>
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<tr>
<td>FPS</td>
<td>first-person shooter</td>
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<tr>
<td>HUD</td>
<td>heads-up display</td>
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<tr>
<td>ITA</td>
<td>integrated textual analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPC</td>
<td>non-player character</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMO(RPG)</td>
<td>massively multiplayer online (role-playing) game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QCA</td>
<td>qualitative content analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QTE</td>
<td>quick-time event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPG</td>
<td>role-playing game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPS</td>
<td>third-person shooter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VR</td>
<td>virtual reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XP</td>
<td>experience points</td>
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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of:

Professor Deborah Lynn Steinberg
1961-2017

Cuttell
1947–2016

Shrimpy
2016

Prawny
2012
Introduction

In its examination of violent, AAA (‘triple A’) games\(^1\), this work provides a perspective on issues of motivation, affect, and ethics in immersive, violent gaming whilst also aiding conceptual and methodological innovation in the field of games studies. Situating its discussion around violent and immersive AAA games, this thesis examines the affective, motivational, persuasive, and identificatory elements of immersive engagement with interactive media. There are three central themes within this project: the affective and persuasive elements of immersive engagement; the players’ ability to agentfully negotiate the freedoms and constraints of the gameworld\(^2\), and the ideological positioning of the player within certain subjectivities. In order to examine these themes, I interrogate three narrative and mechanical\(^3\) branches common to the games studied: traumatic spectacle; the imperative to accumulate, and the provocation of ethical response. This research generates data through deploying a modified version of qualitative content analysis which, while relying on more traditional modes of analysis, is adapted to encompass the interactive components of gameplay. In order to extend this method of analysis into the immersive, this thesis draws on theories of immersion from games studies, digital media and beyond to develop an immersive autoethnographic method which allows myself as the researcher to utilise my experience of immersively undertaking this research as an additional tool for critical engagement.

Me and My Games: Personal Rationale

As my own history with video games influenced my desire to undertake the work laid out here, and moreover as the autoethnographic, immersive method developed and deployed in this thesis positions myself as a component of the research process, it is necessary to give some background about my relationship with the research object. I

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\(^1\) AAA (‘triple A’) refers to a classification, or grading scale, of games. AAA titles can be thought of as equivalent to movie ‘blockbusters’. They usually have large development budgets and are widely promoted before and after release. Often bestsellers, they are expected to be of a high quality, however this ranking is not necessarily a marker of originality nor does it predict a positive critical reception.

\(^2\) The ‘gameworld’ refers to the fictional and virtual world of a video game.

\(^3\) This thesis uses the term ‘mechanics’ to describe the rules which determine player-game interaction, and thus determine gameplay. All video games have mechanics, whether simple or complex.
Introduction

grew up through the generations of consoles; from being weaned on a Gameboy, bonding with my younger sister through our shared love of my Sega Megadrive and her Nintendo 64, suffering through puberty with an Xbox, leaving home with my Xbox 360, to escaping the quarter-life crisis of adult life, responsibilities, and decisions with a PlayStation 4. Until starting this project, much of my engagement with games has been for pleasure and distraction, and was thus decidedly uncritical. However, being a seasoned (‘hardcore’) gamer not only means that I am able to utilise my own experiences when selecting, shaping and defining this project, but also enables me to place myself and my play experiences at the centre of my methodology. The two chosen methods utilised in this research require a high level of expertise and skill gained – in this instance – from a lifetime of player-console synergy.

Us and Our Games: Academic Rationale

Since the advent of home gaming in the 1970s, the activity of playing video games has become increasingly widespread and influential in Western society. In 2008, the UK’s video game industry surpassed the music and movie industries to become ‘the country’s most valuable purchased entertainment market’ (Chatfield, 2009: para. 1). Additionally, considering the time spent immersed in the gameworld necessary when playing a game to completion (often tens of hours), it is possible that video games have the potential for significant cultural and social impact on players. Interestingly, the face of gaming is changing. For the last half decade the ESA’s (Entertainment Software Association) household survey in the United States has shown that the ratio of female to male plays is often close to equal and the age range of players is much broader than the stereotype would suggest (2011: 3; 2012: 3; 2013: 3; 2014: 3; 2015: 3; 2016: 3). In 2016 the ESA claimed that 63 percent of households in the United States of America contained someone who played for at least three hours a week.

---

4 Although contemporary gaming can be thought of as a global activity and industry, for various reasons (laid out in the methodology chapter) this thesis restricts its discussion to AAA games produced within a specific spatiotemporal location; namely, games from the late noughties early teens developed in Western Europe and North America.

5 Reaching the most equal ratio in 2014 – 48:52 of female to male players (ESA, 2014: 3) – the gender play gap has widened in the last two years (ESA, 2015: 3; ESA 2016: 3).

6 In 2016 the ESA claimed that there were as many women over 35 playing video games as there were who 35 and under (3).
shoot ‘em up’ on a console, a massively-multiplayer online role-playing game on a laptop, or a card game app on a smartphone. Indeed, in 2016, 48% of U.S. households own a games console (2). The academic study of video games, though present in a nascent state since that first home games console, is arguably still emerging four decades later.

If we consider both the significant expenditure of time and effort needed to play video games, it seems commonsensical that they have the potential for significant cultural and social impact on players. While this view needs to be investigated and supported, especially as it is a background assumption for the moral panic fuelling media debates around the effects of violent games (see for example Pow, 2012; Daily Mail, 2012), it is nevertheless useful to consider the interactions and perceived engagements which form the basis of gaming praxis and which lead to these assumptions. For many of the narrative-led (storyline heavy) AAA games examined in this research, in order to play the game to completion – whether simply beating the game or actually aiming for a 100% achievement rating – the time spent immersed in the gameworld often totals tens if not hundreds of hours. Rather than being a passive process, playing video games requires active input from the player in order to function and progress. Moreover, there is a necessary process of ‘internalising’ the controls and active problem solving involved in gameplay. In order to ‘beat’ a game therefore, some level of both physical and psychic involvement on the part of the player is necessary.

I propose that in order to better understand and theorise this process of engagement, one method enabling the researcher to achieve critical purchase on this relationship is to practise it as a subject, whilst turning the critical ‘gaze’ upon that interaction.

It was not until the mid-twentieth century that popular culture, the mass media, and ‘lowbrow’ cultural products began to be recognised as ‘legitimate’ sites for

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7 A shoot ‘em up is a subgenre of the shooter genre of games in which the player usually takes control of a vehicle, shooting large numbers of enemies.
8 In digital gaming, a ‘role-playing game’ (RPG) is a genre which emphasises immersive and complex narratives, player choice, statistical and varied character development and levelling, and inventory management. The genre evolved from table-top role-playing games and contains many shared characteristics such as a simulated die-rolling to determine success or failure with attempted moves in combat.
9 ‘Achievements’ in this thesis refers to both Microsoft’s achievement system and PlayStation’s trophy system. Achievements are a meta-goal, ‘unlocked’ (achieved) by fulfilling certain set parameters or actions which are usually arbitrary and can range from completing specific missions, to performing an action a set number of times, to finding a secret. When unlocked, points (‘Gamerscore’ on Xbox, ‘Trophy levels’ on PlayStation) are awarded to the player and are tracked and displayed online via their ID (‘Gamercard’ on Xbox, PSN Profile on PlayStation).
10 For an average of players’ self-reported playtimes, please see GameLengths [no author] (2016).
academic concern (Harrington & Bielby, 2001). There are many justifications games scholars can draw on to underscore the legitimacy of their research – highlighting the economic, cultural, and social consequences of the video game industry, gamer culture, and gameplay. However, in the style of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies, this project begins from the premise that the study of everyday cultures does not need to be defended (‘Bingo, Barbie, and Barthes,’ 2013).

I would suggest that the most interesting focus within the field of game studies lies in the consideration of how the narrative and ‘mechanical’ (rules) immersive character of video games can shape player engagement. Specifically, examining elements of gameplay, but also through various levels of interactivity, and through a thorough analysis of a game’s media elements (narrative, visual, and audial). As such, there are several arenas and key modes of study framing the discussion and analysis in this thesis. As well as strategically situating this project within the academic study of video games in order to address central issues, this thesis also draws upon a wider framework of tools from more traditional media studies, such as film. These tools are utilised within an understanding of affect and identification. Thus, this thesis, in part, derives from these earlier studies of ‘traditional’ media. However, in keeping with the immersive character of gaming it also adapts the tools provided by these studies in order to address the affective and motivational nature of immersion. This project’s potential, therefore, lies in unpacking the affective power of narrative-driven, AAA (blockbuster) ‘immersive games’, through their embodied, projective and emotive elements. Tracking these different elements within the immersive environment of a video game, and their consequences, leads to greater insight into how they relate to society. By understanding the issues surrounding video games and motivation, this thesis is able to draw wider conclusions about the affective, immersive nature of knowledge itself as well as the (social and gendered) consequences of immersive gaming.

**Theoretical Framework**

As is explored more thoroughly in the chapter ‘methodology and method’, this thesis works within a tradition of feminist scholarship by adopting a poststructural approach to knowledge construction. Rather than focusing on developer intent, I question the notion that there is one, ‘correct’ way to play the game or ‘read’ it as a text. The
tripartite relationship between the developers, player and game is a space in which meanings are co-created. Thus any ‘reading’ of the game as a text cannot be a-historic or a-social; all texts are intertextual, and all people live their lives embedded within specific cultural, historic, and social locations. In developing this thesis’ immersive methodology, I recognise and acknowledge my own location and that of the game’s development. I am not, however, confined to studying myself. In exploring the game structures and possibilities for different modes of play (including negotiation with and resistance to game rules) I am able to explore both the ‘preferred playing’ (from ‘preferred reading’) – those modes of play which conform to the rules and narrative structures of the game – as well as those going ‘against the grain’.

The majority of this thesis’ analysis is based in a social semiotics approach when engaging with the potential meanings and readings of specific elements of the game narrative and mechanics. In order to extend this discussion into an interactionist framework, the game elements and playing subject are occasionally considered through deploying psychoanalytic understandings of attachment and Foucauldian theories about the dispersal and coalescing of power. Specifically, in exploring the way engagement, identification, and participation are structured by the game, this project draws upon Foucauldian understandings of power and resistance to consider how the player is positioned and interpellated within particular activities and subjectivities (predominantly, panopticonism, disciplinary power, and neoliberalism in chapter five). In order to attain critical purchase on how immersive engagement with particular narrative and mechanical structures affects player motivation and identification, this thesis draws upon psychoanalytic theories of desire (namely Freud’s writing on the hero and the spectator in chapter four, and Lacanian object relations in chapter five).

In deploying chapter-specific analytical tools, this thesis builds a larger picture of motivation and affect in AAA gaming by examining three theoretically rich, but diverse, elements of gaming. The key analytical tools deployed in this thesis therefore, are specifically developed within each distinct substantive chapter they inform. The chapter-specific theoretical tools range from theories about trauma, witnessing and spectacle in chapter four; literary analysis concerning the theme of (bio)dystopia in chapter five; and deploying Bourdieu’s notion of habitus in chapter six.

Utilising these social semiotic, psychoanalytic, and Foucauldian analytic tools to interrogate three distinct lines of investigation, this thesis is organised into three analysis chapters: trauma and spectacle; accumulation and desire, and ethical response.
Whilst they may initially appear separate, when viewed together these three chapter
specific interrogations build up a larger picture of the affective-persuasive elements of
immersive engagement; the players’ ability to agentfully negotiate the freedoms and
constraints of the gameworld; and the ideological positioning of the player within
certain subjectivities. The culmination of the discussions occurring in the substantive
chapters of this thesis, therefore, reveals tensions underpinning the agency, desire, and
constraint which lie at the heart of immersive AAA gaming. Through exploring the
structuring and limiting of affective response within the immersive game space, these
three analytic explorations are drawn together to develop new understandings of
motivation, affect and desire.

**Methodological Approach**

A number of researchers of video games have posited that the main difficulty facing
games scholars is not why we should study them, but how (Mäyrä, 2008: 2-3; Buckminster, 2006: 1). The application of theories from other disciplines is both useful
and insightful, but as it is hotly debated in the narratology-ludology discussion within
games studies (outlined in the following chapter), is it sufficient in and of itself? As
video games are demonstrably visual and audial, as well as partially structured around
narrative, it would seem video game researchers cannot ignore the scholarship which
exists in fields such as media studies, literature studies, psychology, and sociology.
Beyond this evaluation, however, the video game must be recognised as a medium
distinct from literature and film due to the rules (‘mechanics’) defining and restricting
interactive play. As these rules impact upon other elements of a game (such as
narrative), the rule set governing gameplay must therefore be analysed alongside the
other visual, audial, temporal, social, and experiential elements of a game in order to
give a fair and full analysis.

The first method utilised in this thesis is a mode of qualitative content analysis
(QCA). By design, the QCA engages with not only the narrative elements of the game,
but also the rules and structures which define and restrict play. This QCA is then
extended into an interactionist framework via the second method – immersive
autoethnography. This immersive method is embedded in, and developed from,
feminist understandings of the construction of knowledge and the methods of
autoethnography and autobiography. In undertaking this immersive method, I engage
in the traditional modes of autoethnography and discourse analysis whilst also articulating a ‘self-reflexive’ dimension. Built upon the method of autoethnography, this method enables interrogation of the relationship between the researcher and immersive media ecology through focusing on my experience of undertaking the research. It theorises immersion during gameplay as an affective, embodied state, which is both active and passive, and achieved via visual engagement, projective identification, and haptic\(^{11}\) (touch-based) communication with the player character\(^{12}\) and game world. Deploying this immersive method alongside the qualitative content analysis enables this project to make visible and utilise the relationship between myself as the researcher and the object of study in order to critically assess the affective and embodied experience of narrative, immersive and mechanical game elements.

The concept of immersion is an important, albeit slippery, element of media engagement. Many players say that they actively seek immersive experiences from their gaming practises, and several critics comment that their reviewed games’ ability to immerse the player is a key component of enjoyment (Jennett et al., 2008: 4). Obtaining analytic purchase on such an elusive concept is difficult. Nevertheless, by exploring the use and understanding of immersion in several fields (from immersive theatre, to soundscapes, to gaming) the second chapter of this thesis grounds this project’s use of the concept before deploying it within the immersive method.

**Thesis Questions and Aims**

The overarching question this thesis seeks to address is: how do AAA games attach players and encourage certain modes of play? In order to address this issue, three research questions guide this thesis, covering indexical themes of the project; namely, a testing of the developed research methodology, and a theorisation of the affective and ethical structures of immersive gaming.

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\(^{11}\) ‘Haptic’ relates to the sense of touch and tactile sensations, particularly using touch and proprioception to sense and manipulate objects.

\(^{12}\) The ‘player character’, or ‘playable character’, describes a video game character whose actions are controlled by the player, rather than the game. They can be similar to a film ‘protagonist’, yet differ in that, in some games, many players can play their individual player characters co-operatively. Moreover, there might be several player characters throughout the course of one game. The player character can be human, animal, or object, but is always embodied. There is no player character in god games, for instance, in which the player is omniscient.
• What can an immersive participatory research method reveal about the play experiences and the player’s potential relationship to gameplay and the gameworld?
• How do the structures (narrative, mechanical, and immersive) of violent narrative-led AAA video games encourage certain modes of player involvement, identification, and affective responses?
• How do these structures interpellate the affected, immersed video game player within gendered, classed, or raced subject positions?

In addressing these questions, this thesis aims to explore a number of further themes. These include questions of agency, subjectivity, and ethics. Specific aims include:

• To develop and test an immersive participatory methodology.
• To explore, through visual, audial, technological, and immersive aspects, the embodied and affective dimensions of immersive gameplay.
• To deconstruct the normative and transgressive elements of game mechanics.

In order to answer these questions and achieve these aims, this thesis deploys two intersectional methodological approaches; a qualitative content analysis of ‘violent’ and ‘immersive’ AAA video games, coupled with an immersive and participatory mode of multimedia autoethnography.

Three overarching themes emerged from this research. First, how trauma, vulnerability and spectacle are deployed within game narratives and structures, and how they serve to attach the player and motivate them to overcome and master. Second, the way ‘(bio)dystopian’ game worlds and mechanical incentivisation of accumulation work at cross purposes to both express anxieties about late-capitalist ideologies whilst also structuring player desire along neoliberal lines. Finally, the evocation of ethical response through ‘moral’ game mechanics and the space for players to interpret, negotiate, and play with ethical acts. In following these lines of analysis, this thesis reveals broader cultural tensions surrounding identification and immersion, specifically regarding questions of agency, ethics, and desire. The discussions within
each substantive chapter situates and explains its specific deployment of these indexical concepts.

**Foreshadowing this Thesis’ Arguments**

This thesis contains seven chapters, of which two focus on situating the research within relevant literature, one outlines the methodology and methods, and three are substantive. In this section, I outline the order of this thesis’ approach by summarising each chapter.

Chapter one, ‘Studying Affective, Violent Games: Approaches and Tensions’, and chapter two ‘Theoretical Framework: Investment, Immersion, and the Subject’ outlines the literature in two spheres which are key to locating this thesis’ discussion. The field of games studies is briefly mapped, especially in relation to key historical debates about game forms and modes of analysis, discussions around player-game relationships, and literature published on affective and emotional elements of (violent) gaming. As groundwork for the method chapter, chapter two explores the literature produced within games studies and beyond regarding subjectivity, player investment in the player character, immersion and immersive engagement. This chapter also establishes several theoretical tools, such as Foucauldian understandings of power and this project’s use of a gendered analytic lens.

Chapter three, ‘The Immersive Method’, outlines the rationale and process for the specific research methods utilised in this thesis. It highlights the epistemological assumptions of this research, and explores questions surrounding reflexivity, objectivity, and how certain kinds of knowledge can be accessed through adopting an autoethnographic approach. It lays out this thesis’ two chosen research methods. Firstly, a mode of qualitative content analysis engaging with many aspects of the gamespace and experience is outlined. This method enables exploration of different game elements and analysis of the structures – representative, technological and immersive – directing and constraining the player. Secondly, this chapter outlines a mode of immersive autoethnography developed and practised in this research. It details why and how this method is deployed. The initial game selection process and the analysis of research data produced through these methods is also explained. Finally, chapter three foreshadows this thesis’ conclusion by closing with a brief discussion on limitations and issues arising during the course of trialling the developed methodology.
Chapter four, ‘The Traumatised Player (Character): Violent Spectacle, Immersive Investment, and the Desire to Master’, engages with the themes of trauma and spectacle which are routinely deployed (narratively and mechanically) as part of gameplay in the AAA games studied. I argue these devices function to encourage the player to identify with their character(s) and provokes within them an ethical response; a response which can only be enacted through the performance of legitimate violence in the name of retribution and ‘winning’. I argue this ability to sublimate and master is a core gaming mechanic which, when examined using a gendered and raced analytic lens, displays how these AAA titles narratively and mechanically situate the player within a subject position that is predicated on achieving a mode of mastery rooted in a form of white, Western masculinity.

Chapter five, ‘Incentivising Accumulation: Game Capital, and the Neoliberal Subject’, problematises the imperative to accumulate which is common to the AAA games studied. In this chapter, I argue that, despite many games containing explicit criticisms (both anxious and humorous) about late-capitalist ideology, their mechanics seem to work at cross-purposes to this approach by tracking and incentivising the rampant, necessary accumulation of various forms of game capital. By drawing on Foucault’s notions of panopticonism and disciplinary power, I show how the accumulation of various beneficial tools and aids are an affective, seductive mechanic of gaming – one that motivates player action and encourages viewing the player character as a ‘project’ on which one ‘works’. Taking this view enables me to theorise the relationship between accumulation and forms of (in-game and metagame) game capital by understanding them as acting as technologies of the self. This chapter argues that accumulating, self-improving and investing player occupies a neoliberal (middle-class, male) subject position. I conclude that the ludonarrative dissonance (Hocking, 2007, in Murphy, 2016) existing in the tension between the narrative disavowal of, and anxiety about, late-capitalist ideology and the necessary and unavoidable accumulation present within game mechanics negates these games’ ability to be critical.

Chapter six, ‘Maintaining Immersion through Moral Habitus’, maps the ethical choices presented to the player in the AAA games studied, examining how the player’s ethical responses are both structured and rewarded by the game’s narrative and

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13The term ‘metagame’ refers to elements of the game which are outside of the game itself. This could include ‘walkthroughs’ (strategy guides), the achievement system, the PlayStation Network, player message boards, fan art, game criticism and so on.
mechanics. In so doing, this chapter shows how the ethical avenues available for the player, and imposed by the game’s rules, are often enforced and monitored, and yet may also give space for negotiation and creativity depending on the approach of the player. By drawing on theories of immersion and my immersive autoethnography, the second half of this chapter extends this discussion of ethical game mechanics by theorising the ethical positioning of the player within violent gameplay as being one of negotiation and internalisation of the moral rules. I argue that, over time, the player develops an ethical habitus specific to the game being played. In so doing they are able to enter into the moral rules of the gameworld such that their involvement in problematic acts do not create moral dissonance and negative affects. I claim that, in their ability to be tracked and deployed as a game capital (alongside the other modes of capital discussed in chapter five), the ethical mechanics discussed in this chapter become a key component of play and resistance for players. Thus, rather than being a passive pawn to the game’s ethical and moral standpoint, the video game player can be seen to be an active and agentic ‘player’ on the ethical field of gaming.

This thesis’ conclusion chapter pulls together the threads of analysis explored through the three substantive chapters’ lines of interrogation in order to draw overarching conclusions regarding player affect, desire and identification as allowed and encouraged in the gamespace. It discusses the successes and limitations of the developed and deployed immersive autoethnography. It outlines how the research and discussion within this thesis answers the research questions, fulfils the research aims, and makes a contribution to knowledge, while also acknowledging the shortcomings of this project and highlighting the space for further research.

Methodological and Theoretical Implications of this Project

This research makes a contribution to knowledge by building on and extending the methods of autobiography and autoethnography. It develops and tests a method which enables the examination of the affective and persuasive role of immersion as a mode of engagement. This method makes visible and useful that which many games studies researchers already do – play the games they comment on (such as Green, 2016, and van Nuenen, 2016) – but it does so in a way which utilises that mode of engagement by setting it up as an additional research method, allowing data to be drawn from that process and relationship. Although video games are an ideal medium on which to
perform this exploration, the results from this research have wider-reaching applications due to immersive engagement being possible with a range of other media – from television dramas to novels to virtual reality education. As such, this thesis provides academics from a broad spectrum of disciplines and foci with an additional methodological tool to be deployed alongside other methods in order to comment on the immersive, affective and persuasive elements of their research object.

More specifically in relation to the field of games studies, this thesis contributes to knowledge by commenting on a set of games which are routinely part of the moral panic surrounding games and violence. In developing and practising an immersive methodology, this research is able to critically layer the different elements of gameplay – narrative, mechanical, and immersive – such that, when seen together as a ‘whole’ of gameplay, the trajectories of affect, meaning and persuasion which are imbued within and between these layers of gameplay elements, are revealed and discussed. In following specific lines of analysis, this research connects the immersive with the affective in order to reveal greater tensions surrounding the persuasive and identificatory relationships within media engagements and the underpinning ‘cultural unconscious’ of affect, specifically regarding questions of motivation, desire, and ethics.
Studying Affective, Violent Games: Approaches and Tensions

This literature review sets out the context of video game analysis by situating the debates, discussions and previous approaches in the field relevant to this project. In so doing, it highlights the areas of research into gaming to which this thesis aims to make contributions. Specifically, the first half of this chapter discusses the tensions within the field of video game research regarding the most appropriate means to approach the study of games. It parses the debates surrounding the adoption and adaptation of theories from other disciplines and outlines a methodological debate within the field termed the narratology-ludology divide. Works which have been produced in response to this debate are examined. The second half of this chapter then turns to specific areas of inquiry for this thesis; namely, video games and affect, and gaming as an ethical activity. In order to situate this thesis’ focus on affect as well as its methodological approach, studies concerning the relationship between video games’ structures and emotions are explored. The discussion then turns to setting up this thesis’ use of affect vis-à-vis the major tensions within the field of affect studies. Finally, in order to set up gaming as an ethical activity and this thesis’ specific interest in ethical decision-making in games, the debates and approaches to games, ethics, and violence are explored. In concluding, this chapter makes evident how this research aims to extend existing debates in the field of games studies.

Games Studies

Since the development of the cathode-ray amusement tube\(^1\) of 1947, video games have grown both in popularity and availability; making the leap from arcade to living room in the eighties and then from console to mobile device in the early twenty-first century. Similarly, the study of video games has evolved steadily over time. Early works, fuelled by the public’s fears, predominantly studied the link between aggression and playing violent video games, especially with a focus on children (see, for instance,

\(^1\) Considered by many to be the ‘Eve’ of video games, Thomas T. Goldsmith Jr. and Estle Ray Mann’s interactive electronic device utilised a cathode ray tube and a transparent overlay to simulate firing missiles at enemy aircraft during World War II (Brookhaven National Laboratory, n. d.).
Dominick, 1984; Kestenbaum & Weinstein, 1985; Graybill et al., 1985; and Cooper & Mackie, 1986).

The late nineties and noughties saw an increase in quantity and scope of work studying games and gaming. The academic field of games studies, first recognised as a discipline in its own right after the turn of the millennium (with the creation of the journal Games Studies in 2001 and the Digital Games Research Association in 2003), has seen rapid expansion over the last decade. With the continual development of video game form and gaming technologies, several works from this early games studies expansion were concerned with the history of games, with several books and articles charting the evolution of the video game from the cathode ray amusement tube. Works such as Van Burnham’s (2001) Supercade: A Visual History of the Videogame Age, 1971-1984 and Mark Wolf’s (2008) edited volume The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation and Beyond chart the development of the video game form technologically and culturally.

Due to the relatively recent development of their field, researchers of video games have had to grapple with certain issues in the foundations of their work. The first hurdle has been defining what, precisely, constitutes a video game. Jesper Juul (2003) analyses seven previous definitions of games and makes modifications in order to create his six categories of the game: rules; variable, quantifiable outcomes; value assigned to possible outcomes; player effort; player attached to outcome; and negotiable consequences (‘the same game […] can be played with or without real-life consequences’ [n. pag.]). Rather than taking his categories from what one presumes a game to be, Juul terms this new definition the ‘classic game model’ – a model which fits games prior to the creation of the video game and therefore avoids any bias based on one’s gaming background (n. pag.). Juul recognises the issues with his approach, by acknowledging that open ended simulations (such as The Sims 2 [Maxis]) are by his definition considered to be ‘borderline cases’ as there is no valorisation of the outcome of the game. Nevertheless, Juul’s definition has been employed by other video game scholars – such as David Buckingham (2006) in his introduction to Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play – to assist in defining terms and delimiting scope. The video games examined in this research do not exist as ‘borderline’ cases – they comfortably fit within Juul’s classic game model definition of games. However, in its focus on affect and immersion (set up in this chapter and the following chapter respectively), the application of this research is not limited to securely defined games.
The results from this thesis could be extrapolated to apply broadly to not only borderline cases but other media forms.

Further to the definition of what constitutes a game, some video game scholars have also felt the need to defend their chosen area of research, outlining why video games deserve academic attention. Games are seen by some as a waste of time (Duggan, 2015), juvenile (see, for instance, Jack Arnott’s [2009] experience of ‘coming out’ as a gamer), or without artistic merit (e.g. Ebert, 2010). In the early noughties, during the beginnings of the rapid expansion of video game research, some academics felt the need to justify their interest in studying games, highlighting their artistic merit, economic importance, and cultural significance. For instance, in his chapter ‘Gore Galore: Literary Theory and Computer Games’, Geoffrey Rockwell (2002) argues that games should be treated seriously and that they the driving force in the evolution and design of hypermedia. He asserts that they are not, as some see them, ‘merely plebeian versions of hypertext’ (355). Naturally, in undertaking this research, I believe that video games and gaming practises are worthy of academic study. There are many economic, cultural, and artistic reasons I could cite to support this claim, but I will simply ground my premise within the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies’ assertion that it is through studying the everyday that something about the cultural moment can be revealed (Hall, 2002).

**Studying Video Game Forms**

If early games studies’ discussions first had to parse the definition of games and make a case for researching them, then a secondary issue was how this new media could be understood vis-à-vis existing media theory. Can one simply utilise methods and theories, developed within other fields in order to analyse games and gaming? Or do the unique elements of video games’ form require greater consideration and the development of new taxonomies and methodologies? As explored in chapter three of this thesis, a main issue facing video game scholars is the question of how to study them; what methods to employ, what theories to draw on, and whether those theories require modification.

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2 Such as the aforementioned widespread demographics and playing figures, or that in 2016 the total US consumer spend on the games industry was $23.5 billion dollars (ESA, 2016: 12).
Influential digital media theorist Janet Murray (1997) argues that video games are a ‘cyberdrama’ – a newly evolved form of storytelling. Espen Aarseth (1997), a scholar of video games and electronic literature, refutes this claim by arguing that, in viewing games purely as narrative, Murray ignores essential qualities of both video games and narratives. These two thinkers are emblematic of a methodological issue within games studies that has to be negotiated when setting up this research project. Although this debate was mainly conducted in the late nineties and early noughties, it is still necessary to recognise in this project that there has been significant dispute about whether video games should be researched through an analysis of their mechanics (rules) or by their representation (for example, their story and characters), as this thesis aims to get critical purchase on many elements of video games simultaneously. Much research produced in the field, particularly in the first half of the noughties, engages with this debate. As this project examines several layers and elements of the video game form, this debate, though peaking over a decade ago, is nevertheless important to consider in order to situate and ground this project’s methodological approach.

In his article ‘Games Telling Stories?’ Juul (2001) begins by framing the similarities between games and narrative before analysing the conflicts:

1. Games and stories actually do not translate to each other in the way that novels and movies do. 2. There is an inherent conflict between the now of the interaction and the past or ‘prior’ of the narrative. You can’t have narrative and interactivity at the same time; there is no such thing as a continuously interactive story. 3. The realities between reader/story and player/game are completely different.

All three of Juul’s points are worth noting when advancing with this project. His first point, that there are not parallels which can be usefully drawn between the relationships of novel to movie and game to story, means that academics who study video games must take care when deploying narrative theory. I discuss this issue in the following section, in which I consider how appropriate it is to apply traditional media theories to the study of video games. Juul’s third point regarding the relationship between the player and the game is discussed in the following chapter of this thesis where, by exploring theories of identification and attachment to the player character, I
agree that the interactivity of video games means that the relationship must be theorised in its own right. Nevertheless, that does not necessarily mean that academic research on the reader/story relationship cannot illuminate components of the player/game relationship.

Gonzalo Frasca (2003) contributes to the discussion about whether theories developed within other disciplines can be utilised to study videogames. He argues that video games are based on simulation rather than representation:

Simulation […] provides a different—not necessarily better—environment for expressing the way we see the world. It is common to contrast narrative and drama because the former is the form of the past, of what cannot be changed, while the latter unfolds in present time […] simulation is the form of the future. (233)

While Frasca’s insightful point is necessary to consider when approaching video game research (especially when incorporating an understanding of immersion as this thesis does), there has to be a consideration of how this knowledge then changes the approach to research. If video games are simulations, for instance, rather than representations, does that mean that theories and methods developed and utilised when studying more traditional media forms (such as literature and film) are not at all applicable? Whilst some of the ways we interact with video games differ from our interactions with other media, there are nevertheless still commonalities. For instance, the visual repertoires drawn on in some video games (such as the ones in this study) are similar to film and television, as are the cultural commonsenses deployed throughout the experience, and therefore possibly also the attached resonances and potential affective responses. As such, can screen theory be applied in the same way to Tomb Raider (Crystal Dynamics, 2013) and The Last of Us (Naughty Dog, 2013) as it is to Citizen Kane (Welles, 1941) or The Sopranos (Chase, 1999-2007)? As I go on to argue, I believe narrative theories can be deployed, but only in concert with both an awareness of how video game forms make them different to films and television, as well as a concurrent discussion of the mechanics and other game elements forming the lens through which the player interacts with the game.

As video game studies is a rapidly developing field, and as the medium of games is in some regards similar to other media forms, it seems commonsensical that the
application of theories and methods from other disciplines can be both insightful and useful. Video games are demonstrably both visual and audial, as well as structured around narrative – albeit in loose or fragmentary form. As such, drawing on material from other related disciplines such as media and film studies, literary analysis, sociology, psychology and so on, might enable critical access to certain elements of the game and gaming process. However, as has been shown with Juul’s and Fasca’s positions, it is necessary when applying these theories and methods to the study of games, that their use be accompanied by a discussion about whether these approaches are sufficient in and of themselves. This thesis must therefore recognise and negotiate the fact that video games are a medium distinct from other media turns in several ways.

In order to highlight how this has been successfully navigated by other scholars, and how this thesis hopes to likewise do so, I will point to work within video games studies which has successfully utilised and adapted theories from other disciplines. The most notable interdisciplinary approach is the application of literary and media theories. As games combine images, audio and text, there can be much to be gained from the application of theory in film and media studies which already have developed and established theories with which to analyse these elements. The visual repertoire of a video game – its choice of character and world design, presentation of themes – can be analysed with aesthetics and film theory. However, the application of such theories has to be tempered with an awareness of the peculiarities of video game form.

Some video game researchers effectively combine their analyses of video games, utilising media and film techniques whilst also paying careful attention to the game mechanics. Diane Carr (2003) presents a good example of negotiating this balance in her article contrasting Silent Hill (Konami Computer Entertainment, 1999) and Planescape: Torment (Black Isle Studios, 1999). Carr employs various film and literary theories in her analysis, such as camera orientation, lighting and music, and Freud’s notion of the uncanny and the double. However, she also engages with elements of the game mechanics; for instance, by examining the inventory and character screen in Planescape Torment, Carr concludes that the player’s control reduces the instances of the uncanny and the double in the RPG genre. Carr also analyses the differences between save points, death and respawning in the two games in order to contrast the RPG’s maze-like time and structure with the shooter’s ordering of temporality and conditional spatial progress (n. pag. [para. 6-10]). As such, this article serves as an example of how game mechanics can successfully be analysed
Studying Games

through theories from other disciplines and how these theories can give critical insight into elements of video game form and structure. By viewing several game elements concurrently, and by recognising that these elements are experienced in concert by the player (rather than abstracted as individual components), Carr is able to get critical purchase on game mechanics through the application of theories from other media disciplines. A necessary extension to Carr’s work would be to question whether the use of media and film techniques in the two games are sufficient in themselves, or whether the use of these techniques in a piece of interactive media requires that the theories be adapted or altered in order to more effectively analyse the games.

Bob Rehak (2003) considers this issue in his psychoanalytic exploration of player-avatar relationships, in which he employs Laura Mulvey’s (1975) work on the structure of seeing and the analytical technique of gaze theory to aid his discussion of camera control in video games. He maintains that borrowing techniques from film theory is defensible in the study of games as, due to the similarities between film editing conventions and video game perspectives (such as the restrictive first-person shooter and over-the-shoulder perspective), the two mediums therefore ‘invite comparison’ (118). Rehak acknowledges, however, that the interactivity of a game and thus the greater amount of control given to a player in terms of camera behaviour means that video games can move beyond the implied embodiment of an observer watching a character in a film (119). Rehak focuses on the avatar as a predominantly representational form through the use of film theory. As the ‘gameness’ (Juul, 2001) of video games re/ies, in part, on their interactivity, then this is a necessary element of games to examine. Rehak does not engage with the research that has analysed the nature of the player-game relationship and embodiment through the analysis of interface and gameplay. Consequently, his argument does not fully engage with the video game medium as a game rather than another form of non-interactive, representational media. As Johan Huizinga’s (1949 [1938]) notion of the ‘magic circle’ (the partition which surrounds the virtual world and distinguishes it from the actual world) – taken up by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) – has been shown to be

3 An avatar (in a video game) is the player character who is, often, in part, designed by the player.
4 A ‘first-person shooter’ (FPS) is a game where the player occupies a first-person perspective (that is, they experience the action through the eyes of the player character) and in which the primary mechanic is based on combat using projectile weapons such as guns or bows.
more porous than originally believed (Castronova, 2005: 148), then a discussion of the player’s interaction with the video game even more important.

Another area of video game study which arguably necessitates a multidisciplinary approach is the analysis of a game’s text, which benefits from various discussions and methods employed in literary theory. Literary tools developed within arenas such as semiotics, post-structuralism, and literary theory could, for instance, provide insight into the setting, symbols and actions within a game which the ‘author’ presents. This is not without its difficulties, however, as there is not one ‘author’ in a game, but many writers, artists and programmers who are all responsible for shaping the presentation of symbols and actions. Due to the interactive nature of gameplay, these symbols and actions may be viewed from a different in-game perspective (from perhaps something as simple as a change in the camera angle or the player choosing an alternative narrative route) or missed out entirely. Moreover, unlike literature, game text is not necessarily static. It can be a means for the player to interact with and shape the game’s direction, such as through presenting the player with hypertext (in the form of dialogue or options). In this sense, games are not merely interactive, but are interreactive (Smethurst & Craps, 2015); players interact with the game and the game dynamically reacts, thus shaping their future interaction.

Examining the visual codes and repertoires of video games can also present the same challenge – how to examine games effectively due to their interactivity. In his article ‘Interactivity, Inhabitation and Pragmatist Aesthetics’, Philip D. Deen (2011) employs the writings of pragmatist philosopher John Dewey in order to assess video games as aesthetic experiences. The first problem Deen encounters is how to judge

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5 ‘In-game’ refers to actions and events which take place within the gameworld.
6 One only has to view video game players’ online Xbox Live profiles to see that many games are not played to completion (see de Matos, 2009), and of the completed games many quests and storylines which are not part of the main plot are either missed or skipped. Furthermore, it is arguably impossible for a player to experience all the game has to offer. Even were time constraints not a factor to experiencing every possible outcome of a game with multiple endings (there are players who will spend hours completing every quest and sidequest with multiple playthroughs just to experience the differences in dialogue or outcome), players can also be hindered by their own abilities in the game. A good example of this is *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2009), where the amount of experience gained from killing an enemy is dependent on the player’s choice of difficulty setting. As each level gained unlocks new powers (some practical, others amusing) for the playable character, then it will take an inexperienced player much longer to reach these rewards. Another example would be *Max Payne 2* (Rockstar Vienna, 2003) where the female love interest can only be saved if the player completes the game on the highest difficulty setting. Thus, a player’s inability to complete the campaign on a difficult setting can result differences in storyline or gameplay.
video games artistically without subsuming them to existing conventions of critiquing art, and thereby ignore their interactive nature and their ‘gameness’:

One may argue that video games may be judged by classical conceptions of beauty and artistic merit […] or to elevate video games by integrating them into accepted arts. […] Unfortunately, these two approaches assess the aesthetic standing of video games at the price of their standing as games. To argue that video games may be objects of passive appreciation is to lose the interaction that is essential to the medium. They must be played to be games. […] A third response is to provide a more philosophical defence of video games.

(n. pag. [par. 8])

In his conclusion, Deen recognises that a possible solution to the issue he discusses in this article is the development of an account of aesthetics that specifically fits the video game medium (n. pag. [par. 42]). This conclusion mirrors assertions by other video game scholars, such as Diane Carr (2003), that multidisciplinary approaches and the use of theory from fields outside of video game studies is not always wholly satisfactory. Thus, to fully analyse the video game form we have to both create new theories and adapt existing ones. More importantly, as Deen argues, games have to be recognised as games – their interreactivity and the forms of engagement and play it affords have to be incorporated not only methodologically, but also theoretically, into any examination of them. As such, this thesis not only incorporates an awareness of video game form and elements into its methodology, it also addresses gaming as a holistic experience, rather than fragmenting the game form into discrete elements. Moreover, this chapter and the following chapter incorporates an understanding of the agentic, affected, immersed playing subject in order to recognise the player’s role within the interreactivity of video game play.

Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps’ (2015) assertion that Brandan Keogh (2014) ‘hammered the final nail in the coffin of the narratology/ludology debate’ (Smethurst & Craps, 2015: 270) when he argued that the ‘mechanics and audiovisuals [of videogames must be seen by critics as] symbiotic, a singular and irreducible component of videogame play’ (Keogh, 2014: n. pag. in Smethurst & Craps, 2015: 270). This research follows games scholars such as Diane Carr (2003; 2006a) and Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2006) in their ability to take balanced view of
games and incorporate several aspects simultaneously into their analyses. For instance, Carr’s 2006a study utilises narrative theory in order to inform a case study based on the BioWare game *Baldur’s Gate* (BioWare, 1998). Through an analysis of the story, play mechanisms and messages, she concludes that even games which are story-driven ‘do not reside comfortably within existing models of narrative’ (38). Rather than seeing this as a reason to subsume the importance of the representative in a video game to what is interactive and rule-based, Carr uses the coexistence of the game elements and the narrative qualities of *Baldur’s Gate* to express the need for a rethinking of narrative theory. Carr’s suggestion that we, as video game researchers, need to adapt existing theory from other disciplines rather than applying them directly to the study of games is one voiced by others in the community.

This section has explored one of the main issues academics face when approaching the study of video games – that is, their varied and various elements (mechanical, narrative, representational, embodied and so forth) and how best to get critical purchase on them. I have given examples from some scholars who have navigated this issue. Clearly, it is necessary to ‘borrow’ from other disciplines in order to examine the myriad ‘layers’ of video games. However, as I have shown through discussing previous scholarship, there is always the risk of not engaging with the interactivity and elements of the game form comprising that which makes a game a game when doing so.

Although some video game scholars argue that a focus on a game’s narrative ignores the main feature of a game – its ludic qualities (Juul, 2001: n. pag. [par. 44]), I believe that it is nevertheless reasonable to apply narrative theory to a game when this application is balanced with a study of the relationship between the game’s narrative and its ‘gameness’.

To ignore theory originating in another discipline in the study of a video game—to reduce the game to its ludic and mechanic qualities—is to reduce the effectiveness of the analysis of the game as a whole. A video game is more than a definition of its gameness, it must also be linked to other theories of play, be they cultural, psychological, historical or social (Mäyrä, 2008: 37). Thus, when studying video games, it is clearly prudent to take a holistic and interconnected approach whilst still highlighting the interactive nature of gameplay and including a

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8 Ludic refers to those game elements which constitute play.
study of a game’s ludic elements in one’s discussion rather than focusing the research solely on the representational aspects. They must be seen as a whole – their myriad parts being significant in the manner they co-constitutively create gameplay.

Affective Gaming

Concerning the ongoing debate within the games studies community about the relevance of the application of theories from the study of other media, such as film and literature techniques, this research aims to navigate this issue by incorporating various elements of gameplay in the analysis; both narrative elements (such as character development, storyline, and visual and audial elements) and game elements (such as rules, AI, and physics). Also, the tools utilised from the study of other media are employed via an immersive methodology in order to understand the affective and gendered qualities of the immersive praxis of gaming.

The question of why people play games is debated by players, developers, critics and scholars alike. Many reasons have been posited: that we play to feel competent (Ryan et al., 2006); we play to feel rewarded (Reeves, 2012); we play in order to experience and overcome failure (Juul, 2013); we play in order to feel that we matter by affecting the outcome (Krzywinska & Brown, 2015); we play to be social with others, either co-operatively in person, or via online multiplayer (Lee et al., 2012); we play to escape by immersing ourselves in an environment apart from our own mundane and restricted lives (Gotto, 2013); we play to perform actions and take risks which would have significant and detrimental consequences in the ‘real’ world (Perreault, 2014); we play to ‘try on’ and find our ideal selves (Przybyski et al., 2011); we play to feel (Cuttell, 2014). Although many of these reasons – specifically questions surrounding spectacle, ‘mattering’, and winning – are discussed during the course of this thesis, it is the emotional and affective potential of gaming which is of specific interest. Briefly exploring player websites and message boards reveals the affective and emotional language players deploy when discussing and describing their gameplay experiences, both mechanic and narrative (respectively):

Doing that aerial ballet in Sonic [The Hedgehog (Sega, 1991)] has nothing to do with reaction time, or decision-making or even anticipation. It's pure rhythm, nailing the notes like hitting keys on a piano. And when you do it just right, when
you fly through the level and nail all the jumps and boosts and kills, it has to feel like the first time somebody learning an instrument plays a familiar song and makes it sound like the actual song, the *beautiful contours of perfection at the command of your own fingers*. [emphasis added]

(Wong, 2012: n. pag.)

So when Kai Leng [antagonist in *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012)] beat me to the punch, when the dawning realization came that they did everything they could to help me and yet I still failed, *it broke my heart and my ego*. [...] They placed their faith in you and despite the chances of them dying they still went on ahead and got your back. And in the end you failed them all. *It really hurt*. [emphasis added]

(Nikki, 2012: n. pag.)

Although some games scholars have written on the subject of players’ emotions as elicited by gameplay, there still remain significant gaps in the literature and debates about methodologies or taxonomies. In order to situate this thesis’ discussion within the field of games studies, this section first outlines the previous approaches to emotions and affect in gaming. Then, the broader ‘turn to affect’ within the humanities and social sciences is explored, specifically regarding this project’s theoretical handling of affect.

From this chapter’s previous discussions regarding the applicability of utilising theories from other disciplines to study video games, the theoretical tools deployed within games research requires careful consideration. However, it is possible to engage with several elements of a game through considering affect – narrative, mechanics, and play (as they are all potential sites for eliciting affective experiences). Of the scholarship which has been produced by games scholars on emotions (as a broad category) and games, there are chiefly two categories. The first is grouped by their focus of organising and classifying the potential emotional elements in a game. For example Aki Järvinen’s (2009) chapter in *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* develops a criteria for detailed study of gameplay where objects, agents and events in games potentially trigger emotions that are significant as part of the play experience (85). In his creation of a framework of studying emotions in games Järvinen goes some way towards developing a theory of categorising emotion in games which is useful and applicable to game designers and developers. Previous attempts to categorise the
emotions elicited by gameplay have been made by Nicole Lazzaro (2004), Jonathan Frome (2007) and Stéphanie Bura (2008). Indeed, Lazzaro’s study ‘Why We Play Video Games: Four Keys to More Emotion Without Story’ was funded by XEOdesign, her consulting company, specialising in player experience, and offering advice for game developers. She argues that there are four keys to eliciting emotions in video games: hard fun (the challenge); easy fun (such as exploration); altered states (what emotions are created in the play), and the people factor (the chance to socialise) (4-5). As her title suggests, however, her team did not engage with the emotions that can be elicited through the game’s representational elements, such as its storyline. This is problematic for this research due to its focus on immersion in AAA games which are ‘narrative heavy’ (in that they make the story a central aspect of the play experience). Also, as has already been discussed, analysis of the representational elements of a video game is valid but necessitates simultaneous consideration of the game’s system and interactivity.

The second group of scholarship which examines games and emotions is linked by their methodology. Similar to the research on the level of aggression in play, this group studies player emotion through the use of psychophysiological testing on players’ response to gameplay. Through measuring their inter-beat interval (heart rate) and skin conductance, and using methods such as facial electromyography, research such as the studies conducted by Niklas Ravaja et al. (2006a; 2006b) are able to draw conclusions based on players’ arousal and valence. In their 2006a study, Ravaja et al. use inter-beat interval to measure players’ level of arousal, and a self-report questionnaire to measure presence, valence and arousal. They discover that players report a higher level of arousal and have a faster heartbeat when playing against a friend as opposed to a stranger or the computer (332). Their 2006b study focuses on how specific game events elicit phasic psychophysiological responses of players’ emotional valence and arousal (361). However, they note that one of the issues with their methodology is that the interpretation of the data is ‘partly dependent on the research paradigm’ (347) and that ‘it is also possible that the emotional responses to these events would differ as a function of the context (e.g. game genre, storyline, general atmosphere, speed of play)’ (363).

This thesis’ discussion is located within the first group of scholarship in that it considers the affective and immersive elements of game narratives and gameplay structures. This discussion is extended by developing and trialling the immersive
methodology (which is theoretically set up in the following chapter and outlined in depth in chapter three). I now turn to the approach to studying affect in a broader academic context in order to theoretically underscore this thesis’ use of the concept.

**Affect**

There has in recent years been what Patricia Ticineto Clough (2007), in the introduction to her work with Jean Halley, terms a ‘turn to affect’ within academic research. Occurring in many disciplines, this interest in affect seeks to highlight and understand how autonomic corporeal-affective process interact with and impact upon peoples’ experiences and cognition. As Eric Shouse (2005) attests, ‘the power of many forms of media lies not so much in their ideological effects, but in their ability to create affective resonances independent of content or meaning’ (para. 14). Many have highlighted the importance of affect when researching new media. For instance, in the conclusion to his article ‘Core Affect and the Psychological Construction of Emotion’, James Russell (2003) notes that he believes more research is required specifically in the fields of ‘empathy, displeasure motives, and emotional responses to virtual reality, art, and drama’ (ibid.: 167). In mobilising the concepts of affect and immersion both theoretically and methodologically, this research contributes to the discussion surrounding affective media.

There are many different approaches to the study of affect. Affect Theory was attributed to the work of psychologists Silvan S. Tomkins (1962; 1963) and Paul Ekman (1994), who put forward the notion that there are a number of ‘basic’ emotions which can be discretely identified. Although influential within neuroscience, psychobiology and affect studies more broadly, their notion – which Ruth Leys (2011) terms the ‘basic emotions paradigm’ – has been called into question by Leys, Russell (2003), Margaret Wetherell (2012) and others who assert that such findings are reductionist and empirically flawed.

Some writers, such as Brian Massumi (2002), Nigel Thrift (2004), and Shouse (2005), following the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), have argued that as autonomic affects occur without conscious awareness, they are prior to ideology; that they influence our thoughts and actions, but are automatic and independent. Although the terms emotions, feelings and affect are often used interchangeably in common parlance, these thinkers differentiate between these terms. Eric Shouse (2005)
describes affect as being an ‘intensity’, whereas feelings are ‘personal and biographical’ (para. 2) in that, as we experience them, we contextualise and label them within and against our previous experiences. He explains that emotions, however, are understood to be social; they may be ‘true’ expressions of the feelings or internal state of that person, or they may be feigned. Shouse believes that what is important is the communicativeness of the display. Likewise, Massumi (1987) describes affect as a ‘prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act’ (xvi). Leys (2011) critiques the different approaches to affect, arguing that the work of Thrift and Massumi (who follow Deleuze and Spinoza) can be linked to Tomkins’ and Ekman’s attitudes through their ‘shared anti-intentionalism [...] [and belief that] ‘affect is independent of signification and meaning’ [original emphasis] (443).

For theorists such as Massumi (2002), the turn to affect has been a turn away from considering the ideological, and a turn towards the potential, intense, and post-human. Conceptualising affect as being prior to ideology is antithetical to critical theory, its reliance on discourse, and its conceptualisation of subjectivity as apart from biology. The materialist shift has been influential within feminist research as it enables thinkers, such as Eve Sedgwick (who explicitly draws on the basic emotions paradigm), to consider issues such as identity with a focus on embodiment (Leys, 2011: 441). This understanding of affect as being prior to cognition and thus without ideology is problematic, however, as Margaret Wetherell explores in her book Affect and Emotions: A New Social Science Approach (2012). She thoroughly parses and problematises the differential treatment of, and approaches to, affect in disciplines ranging from human geography to psychoanalysis. Wetherell recognises that, within the study of affect, there is a need to question the discursive, ideological, and semiotic:

Given the sustained critique of discourse theory found in the turn to affect, what is surprising, in fact is how applicable some of the key concepts of eclectic social psychological discourse analysis (such as interrogating subject positions, dilemmas, moments of trouble, repertoires, etc.) remain for analysing affective practise.

(20-21)
Wetherell draws on examples from other theorists such as Lynne Layton (2006, in Wetherell, 2012: 109-10) who examine affects with a social dimension, such as disgust as social distinction; a middle-class affective response to working-classness. Wetherell examines the discrete social interactions between children on the playground to support her assertion that ‘human affect is inextricably linked with meaning-making and with the semiotic (broadly defined) and the discursive [so] it is futile to try to pull them apart’ (20). She defines affect as ‘embodied meaning-making’ which could be understood as ‘human emotions’ (4).

Likewise, in her exploration of children’s affective and gendered relations when playing multiplayer and co-operative games, Valerie Walkerdine (2007) argues that, in order to engage with affect, researchers must interrogate three aspects of experience – sensation, ideation, and defence. Meaning that to fully engage with affect we must not only look at what is felt, but also what those feelings mean and why they exist. In her book she extends this argument and posits that ‘the sensation, ideation and fantasy […] are contained within complex relational dynamics which flow in and through the life world, as well as being unconscious intersubjective dynamics’ (Walkerdine, 2007: 26).

In examining the affective potential of AAA gaming in this research, I am primarily drawing on Walkerdine’s and Wetherell’s understandings of affect. I draw on Wetherell’s concept of affective practise when developing my immersive method such that I am able to tread the analytic line between the discursive and the affective. Wetherell insists that affective practise ‘focuses on the emotional as it appears in social life and tries to follow what participants do. It finds shifting, flexible and often over-determined configurations rather than simple lines of causation, character types and neat emotional categories’ (4). Affective practise examines the transmission of affect between bodies, and between subjects and objects, and is part of the evaluation, communication, decision-making, and relations between actors. In following Wetherell, this thesis engages with affect as both material and embodied, but also as social, cultural, and ideological. In order to examine the affective potential of gaming this thesis examines the ways in which participation is structured and restricted by the game rules and narratives. To do so, it deploys the immersive method developed in chapter three which highlights the affective responses of myself as the immersed researcher, considers the practice of gaming (the learned bodily rhythms and responses), and incorporates them as part of the collected data. Empirical research into
affective responses ‘raises conundrums’ (Lambert, 2016: 2) which this thesis attempts to address by bringing the notion of immersion into the method of autoethnography, whereby I strongly and intensely engage with the source material, keep an audio diary during (and shortly following) those moments of affect, and later bring in deeper contemplation and reflexivity.

The affective responses documented through this research are not only discussed as material and embodied, but their ideological and socio-cultural location are questioned through reflexive contemplation. Although the importance of bodies in Wetherell’s deployment of affective practise is central, and the study of video games would appear to be more semiotic and discursive than material, I believe that her understanding of affect can be successfully deployed when discussing video gaming. This is because the body of the player is a necessary component in the process of gaming as there is a close, haptic relationship to the onscreen activity in the gameworld. That is, through playing and becoming proficient with the interface (be it controller, joystick, keyboard or otherwise), video game players develop what Graeme Kirkpatrick (2012) describes as their ‘gaming habitus’ – they learn, become comfortable with, and ‘internalise’ the controls such that seamless interaction is achieved. They no longer need to consciously think about which button produces which response; it becomes automatic, existing within the player’s muscle memory. Moreover, the affective resonances of game elements are sometimes experienced as bodily intensities by the player – I experienced breathlessness, sweaty palms, shaking, twitching, muscle tension, light-headedness, and other physical sensations during this research. I highlight examples of these journal entries during this thesis’ discussion.

Episteme

This thesis, among other questions, asks what an immersive-affective participatory research method can reveal about the play experiences and the player’s potential relationship to gameplay and the gameworld. This question is considered by exploring how we – in this instance, as researchers of media – come to know through (immersive, affective) experience. As such, the question of affective experience and knowledge to

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9 As mentioned in the opening of this thesis, ‘haptic’ relates to the sense of touch and tactile sensations, particularly using touch and proprioception to sense and manipulate objects.
this project is central. How might examining the immersive experience of contemporary popular video games come to reveal something about the cultural moment; the ‘cultural unconscious’ (Epstein & Steinberg, 2011: 90)? In her book *Genes and the Bioimaginary: Science, Spectacle, Culture*, Deborah Lynn Steinberg (2015) examines science fiction ‘as both a reflection of, and a commentary on the feeling-knowledge regimes of a particular moment, what might be termed the *cultural episteme*’ [original emphasis] (112). In her earlier work, ‘the search for the Jew’s gene: science, spectacle, and the ethnic other’ (2009), Steinberg theorises the way viewers draw on cultural commonsenses, preferred knowledges and affectivities in order to ‘fill in’ the gaps in between narrative and semiotic fragments. Likewise, in its concern with the affective, immersive experiences of gameplay moments, the affective ‘filling in’ which occurs, and the specific knowledges that these experiences impart, this thesis follows Steinberg’s exploration of ‘feeling structures’ and questions the player’s potential affective-immersive interpellation through specific gameplay structures and generic tropes. The way this process is incorporated in the multi-stage process of this thesis’ developed and tested immersive method is outlined on page 88 of chapter three.

**The Ethics of Violent Gaming**

Although many media forms have been the subject of scrutiny in respect to not only the morality of their content but also the potential for ‘adverse’ moral effects on those who engage with them,¹⁰ video games have, almost since their inception (and certainly from their arrival in homes as consoles) created waves of public anxiety about their potential for harm (Ferguson, 2013). There are several reasons for this, not least that all new media have historically been subject to ethical scrutiny. Beyond this, the immersive quality of games, and their ability to place the player in a position ostensibly more agentic than other media has served to fuel this anxiety. Moreover, games as a medium have often relied on players performing seemingly¹¹ violent actions as the main mechanic and means of advancing the story. Coupling these elements with the

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¹⁰ Novel reading by women in the eighteenth century caused anxieties and outrages not dissimilar to the moral panic which currently surrounds video gaming (Vogrinčič, A., 2008).

¹¹ ‘Seemingly’ because there is a debate to be had about whether *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sega, 1991) jumping on a Moto Bug (robot ladybird) in order to rescue the trapped animal inside can be thought of as a *violent* action along the same lines as Trevor in *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013) shooting an unarmed man in the head with a shotgun at point blank range.
anxiety surrounding what was (arguably) previously a more gendered and potentially isolating space,\textsuperscript{12} and the genesis of public anxiety about home gaming can be seen as located in several concerns. As this thesis explores affective and violent AAA games, one of the themes which emerged from the data concerns ethical gaming and the player’s moral decision-making. Therefore, this literature review would not be complete if it did not engage with the substantial amount of literature which centres on problematising violence and video games.


Before outlining previous examinations into violent gaming and ethical gameplay, I am first required to clarify this thesis’ use of the terms ‘ethical’, ‘moral’, and ‘violent’. Throughout this project I use these terms to distinguish between the way acts may be differentially viewed as right or wrong, and the game’s judgement of particular actions. This thesis’ discussion of ethical actions in games (predominantly undertaken in chapter six) does not seek to draw a normative or meta-ethical conclusion. That is, it does not seek to determine the ‘rightness’ of certain in-game actions, nor does it consider what ‘right’ means. Rather, this thesis seeks to address the way players’ decision-making about acts which may be considered to have an ethical valence can be structured by the game or affectively rationalised by the player. Chapter six specifically considers the way certain behaviours and decisions are presented to the player, what space for freedom of action they may be given, how the game structures may influence their ethical decision-making, and how they may navigate the issues of participating in certain actions.

The term ethical in this thesis, usually deployed when describing an in-game action, refers to those actions which may be seen as having an ethical valence. For instance, a game decision based on the ‘trolley problem’, whereby the player can kill one person in order to save five, would be described as an ethical act. In discussing this action, I am not interested in the rightness or wrongness of the act beyond the fact

\textsuperscript{12} Although current statistics place the percentage of players who identify as female at somewhere around the fifty percent mark, home console gaming demographics in the 1980s were predominantly male, with women representing only 21\% of primary ‘gamers’ (Main, 1988), and 27\% of NES (Nintendo Entertainment System) players in the USA (Nintendo of America Inc., 1988, in Lindner & Gray, 2013: 8). As games moved from arcades to living rooms, to bedrooms, some have argued that the community became atomised and that gaming became a more physically isolating activity (Williams, 2006).
that it is an ‘ethical’ act (that is, ‘ethically problematic’) in this thesis’ use of the term. Rather, I would approach it from the standpoint of considering how the game might position the player and structure their decision-making process such that they experience the action in a particular way. In describing an act as ‘ethical’, then, I am not saying it is good or bad, right or wrong, but rather that it is an act which could potentially be judged deontologically or teleologically as good, bad, right or wrong.

In this thesis, the term moral is utilised in relation to an individual’s judgement about the rightness and wrongness of ethical acts. The concept of the ‘individual’ is also extended to include the game itself. As such, this project deploys the term moral to refer to the specific ways a video game may judge a player’s chosen actions as right or wrong. Examples of this judgement occurring can be seen in the way some games attribute ‘morality’ points for specific in-game actions, or in the way NPCs may differentially react to the player and their actions. For instance, *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004) judges the killing of NPCs to be an ‘evil’ act, whereas the gifting of money is considered to be ‘good’. Many in-game acts which may be viewed as ethically problematic in wider society are not necessarily ‘commented on’ by the game’s moral system. As such, an in-game act which this thesis describes as ‘ethical’ may not be seen as a ‘moral’ act within the game, due to lack of feedback on the rightness or wrongness of that act. It is also important to note that, while games’ moral systems may view certain acts as being right or wrong, they do not necessarily seek to inhibit actions they view as wrong; they may reward all ‘paths’, or may even give specific encouragement in the form of reward for certain acts viewed as wrong by ethicists (such as the murder of innocents). The ways in which ethical acts are judged (or not judged) to be moral by the game system is explored in chapter six.

In regards what constitutes a violent act within the gameworld, this thesis takes the view that acts within the gameworld can be described as violent when physical force is used in order to kill or injure another character, to damage or destroy in-game objects, or when aggressive and threatening language is used to intimidate, shame or belittle another character. These acts may be perpetrated by the player. Likewise, they may be actions directed at the player by enemies or NPCs. As this research is concerned with AAA adult games which contain ‘violent’ interactions within the gameplay and narrative, the research into out-of-game violence and video games is relevant to this work, despite not being the focus of this examination.
Violence and Video Games

There have been several projects within the field of video game studies which have specifically investigated the link between playing violent video games and player aggression. Many such studies employ psychophysiological testing of subjects in the act of playing video games in order to draw conclusions from readings such as skin conductance and facial electromyography. Nicholas Carnagay and Craig Anderson’s (2005) research is typical in that it examines the different effects of playing a violent video game where violent acts are either rewarded or punished, and compared it to the effect of playing a non-violent video game. They measured blood pressure, heart rate, and the player self-reported their level of aggression through taking the State Hostility Test. Carnagay and Anderson’s findings suggest that video games which reward violent behaviour increases three aggression-related variables – aggressive affect, aggressive cognition and aggressive behaviour (887). However, they conclude that their results do not indicate how aggression levels in the player will be affected if the game neither rewards nor punishes violent behaviour (888). In Anderson’s previous article with Brad Bushman (2001), a meta-analysis of the literature within this field revealed a link between video game violence, heightened aggression and a temporary reduction in pro-social behaviour (358). This sentiment has been echoed by other scholars such as Mary Ballard and Robert Lineberger (1999), Matthew Eastin (2006), and Bruce Bartholow (2002) in another article written with Anderson. A more recent article by Michael Ward (2010), however, found that, when other covariates (such as sex) are taken into account, the link between violence in video games and fighting in adolescents is not statistically significant unless the individual plays for over four hours a day (n. pag.). These investigations are all important in order to better understand the potential relationship between violent media and people perpetrating aggressive acts in the ‘real world’. But they do not engage with how players negotiate their relationship to these violent acts which they have both witnessed and perpetrated.

Of the material which has been produced around testing player responses to violent gameplay, the most pertinent areas explored in relation to this thesis’ focus is research which concerns the options players take in the gameworld and how it makes them feel (both during play and afterwards). Many explanations for players’ decisions to perform immoral actions have been proffered. For instance, some argue that players see it as not being real – i.e. there is no real harm-doing and that it is only a game
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(Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010). Other scholars have explored the personality of the player as a variable, concluding that there is, among other things, a gendered division in the approach to violent and immoral in-game acts and decisions (Lin, 2011). Moreover, others have recognised the importance of the game as a rule-bound space within which the player is forced to participate in certain moral or immoral actions (Hartmann & Vorderer, 2010).

*Moral Disengagement*

The various cues used in video games – as in other media – which trigger the player’s moral disengagement have been touched on in other research. Moral disengagement describes the detachment of moral judgements from ethical actions due to various cues embedded within the narrative and mechanics. When moral disengagement occurs, in-game violence does not lead to self-sanctions\(^\text{13}\) (Bandura, 1990). Albert Bandura, Claudio Barbaranelli, Gian Vittorio Caprara and Concetta Pastorelli (1996) termed such cues ‘moral justification’ (364) whereby immoral acts can be justified and reframed as moral. ‘Although systematic content-analyses of moral disengagement cues in violent video games are lacking to date, justification of violence and a distorted portrayal of consequences seem to be among the more common cues embedded in violent games’ (Hartmann, 2013: 118). Various tropes which are commonly deployed in AAA games can be seen to act as cues for moral disengagement, such as the heroic/anti-heroic quest for justice or vengeance (discussed in chapter four) which encourages the player to view the killing of certain characters as necessary or even desirable. Likewise, the ‘stealing’ or looting of useful items which, as detailed in chapter five, can be rationalised and seen as necessary for progression and is thus a moral disengagement cue.

*Rules of the Game*

One of the arguments put forward by scholars approaching the question of how players negotiate tensions arising from ethical acts within virtual spaces is that the players

\(^{13}\) Self-sanctions refer to the process by which people regulate their ethical actions. They are developed through the internalising of moral standards via socialisation. As the name suggests, self-sanctions are internally imposed and can be disengaged through various mechanisms (Bandura, 1990).
abide by the rules of the game. This operates beyond the virtual, as it has been used to explain unusual responses to ethical acts within other real world ‘closed’ spaces such as sports. In their analysis of moral reasoning and sport, Brenda J. Bredemeier and David L. Shields (1986) describe evidence of ‘bracketed morality’ whereby ‘egocentricity is redefined as appropriate’ (257). They term this ‘game reasoning’. Extrapolating this concept to ethical acts within gaming, immoral acts (such as killing) within game spaces can be seen to not only be allowed within the rules of the game, but part of the ‘game reasoning’ – they are encouraged, rewarded and often unavoidable. They are seen by most players as falling within the boundaries of ‘fair play’ (that which is permissible within the game’s rules) and are, as such, morally legitimate actions (Powers, 2003: 197).

In the substantive chapters of this thesis (especially chapter six), these mechanisms for rendering violent play pleasurable are investigated further. I draw on both the moral disengagement and rules of the game arguments to consider how these affectively function when immersed in violent gameplay.

**Conclusion**

When considering and triangulating the specific spheres within games studies discussed here - methodological approaches, affective gaming, and ethical responses – there is clearly space for further discussion to be had. The previous research produced has been thorough and thought-provoking, and whilst it is an expanding field and more scholarship is produced year-on-year, there are still key gaps which this research attempts to fill. This thesis locates its research within the previous scholarship laid out here, as well as considering the broader theoretical discussions surrounding subjectivity, investment, and immersion laid out in the following chapter.

Concerning affective play, most existing scholarship has focused either on the measurement of psychophysiological reactions to gameplay and has overlaid the readings on to a graphically represented dimensional concept of emotions, or it has attempted to further games design through the categorisation of emotions elicited by gameplay. This thesis focuses instead on the ways in which the structures of gameplay elements affect and delimit the player’s potential affective responses to and experiences of gameplay. As such, this thesis does not seek to categorise specific elicited emotions, but consider how various forms of player engagement could produce
certain affective and motivational responses. This specific structuring of affective responses is then examined via its potential ideological resonances and the cultural commonsenses it mobilises.

Following the debate between narratology and ludology in game studies which regards the applicability of theories from other disciplines to the study of video games, most of the aforementioned studies in games and emotions are predominantly linked to the ‘game mechanics’ side of games (the ludology side). However, when a player plays a game, they do not necessarily experience the emotions from the narrative/storyline and the game rules/game play as two distinct and separate categories of emotions. It is the marriage of various elements of video games that enables them to elicit strong emotions in the player and create an experience which is engaging and immersive. As such, a holistic examination of game experience is necessary to access games’ affective potential. This research considers how video games can structure affective responses – not only through elements of game play and representational elements, but also through interactivity and immersion. As such, this thesis must therefore consider the affective potentialities of gaming through deploying methods which enable the holistic analysis of gameplay experience – accessed by examining not only the representational and mechanical elements of gameplay in concert, but also the immersive qualities (discussed in further detail in the following chapter). This project’s potential lies in the possibility of revealing the affective power of games and the structuring of possible player responses to the various elements and layers of the game. Tracking these structures and various immersive emotions present in different types of games can lead to greater understanding of how these relate to society. An understanding of the issues surrounding video games and affect can enable wider conclusions to be drawn about the articulation of these feeling structures and their related social structures and ideological consequences.

As no one field contains the complete set of tools required for this project, it is necessary to develop a methodology which borrows from theories on immersion, affect and desire as well as more traditional media theories, whilst maintaining a focus on the game form itself. As such, this project must develop a method for the incorporation of several toolkits and then modify them to suit the study of video games (i.e. the incorporation of methods of studying game mechanics alongside media, ideological, and immersive elements). Such a strategy allows this thesis to analyse several layers of video games without having to give specific priority to the narrative, the game
mechanics, or the experience of play. Chapter three presents the methods with which this thesis attempts to fulfil these goals.
As demonstrated in the previous chapter, there are many approaches which could be insightful and interesting when considering how to analyse video games. This chapter continues the project of developing a suitable theoretical framework with which to answer this thesis’ research questions and aims. In choosing to focus on the specific issues as laid out in the research questions and aims, I realise that I cannot address other issues. I believe, for instance, that other tools from social semiotics, object relations, and philosophies of desire could all be deployed to analyse the motivational aspects of the affective-immersive-experiential elements of gameplay. I have selected my tools for the reasons laid out in both this chapter and the following one. By predominantly utilising a social semiotics approach, and a specific set of methods, I thus recognise that whilst I am able to highlight a specific academic perspective and feed into a specific debate (with specific historic and social roots), it cannot be all-encompassing. I am not seeking to perform a totalising analysis of immersive experience (as that would be beyond the scope of a single thesis). Rather, the concepts laid out in the previous chapter, and this one, are used to attain critical purchase on certain elements of immersive experience – namely, the affective, subjective, and ideological.

With that in mind, this chapter establishes this thesis’ theoretical framework and grounds its understanding of the subject and immersive engagement in games studies as well as broader approaches within media studies, sociology and psychology. It set up the main theoretical spheres on which the three substantive chapters draw. Additional chapter-specific theoretical material required for each of the individual substantive chapters is introduced in the chapter it informs; such as literature on trauma and spectacle in chapter four, dystopia and neoliberalism in chapter five, and habitus in chapter six. All three analysis chapters, however, are grounded on the theoretical bases explored and laid out in both this and the previous chapter, due to their central focus on affect, player engagement, and immersion.
For the purpose of this project, the previous chapter’s discussion of affective and ethical experiences of violent gaming needs to be situated within an understanding of the (playing) subject, their attachment to the gameworld, and the experience of being immersed in play. As such, the relationship between the player and the game is explored in the section ‘the playing subject’, in which this thesis’ understanding of the subject and subjectivity is introduced. In order to set up this thesis’ methodological claims and the developed ‘immersive method’, this chapter next situates the major debates, discussions and analyses in the study of immersion, both within gaming and in wider contexts. It also seeks to negotiate some of the tensions surrounding research into immersion. In so doing, this chapter helps situate this project’s exploration into immersive investment when gaming and ground the affective responses detailed in the immersive research journal within broader academic studies. Finally, this chapter briefly set up this thesis’ feminist approach and use of gender as a framing lens in order to theoretically situate chapter four and five’s concluding remarks concerning the potential gendered and classed resonances of various affective gameplay elements.

The Playing Subject

In order to consider the affective relationship between the triad of player-interface-game, the theoretical understanding and handling of the subject deployed in this thesis needs to be fully explored before the concept of affect can be efficiently engaged with. It is important, when researching interactive technology, that the embodied and active components of play be highlighted. As such this research must set up how it conceives of the playing subject. It would be easy for discussions of the playing subject to follow a modernist Kantian conceptualisation of the subject and conceive of the player as a rational, autonomous, and (mostly) disembodied agent. This would be a mistake. The notion of the player as a rational, agentic, ethical being needs to be problematised. Based in white, Western traditions, such understandings of the subject are problematic in their privileging of an ideal which is raced, gendered, and classed (Rebughini, 2014). Moreover, this Cartesian dualism between the mind and the body does not enable this thesis to consider the situated, affective, or embodied within its notion of subjectivity. This thesis therefore requires a conception of the subject with engages with all three of these elements (the player, the interface, and the game); not least because video
gaming is a physical, as well as mental, endeavour, in which players’ bodies are as important to their success as their mental faculties. Beyond this recognition of the importance of bodies, a theory of the playing subject also needs to acknowledge the affective element of experience which informs subjectivity. In the previous chapter, I discussed the importance of recognising the emotional layers of game experiences as players’ feelings are not only a core reason they choose to play, but also because it is in the affective that we can reveal something about the relationship between the playing subject and the gameworld. By conceiving of the playing subject as an *affected* player, this thesis can highlight and examine the emotional within gaming experiences. Finally, the playing subject needs to be recognised as situated; their backgrounds (class, race, gender, sexuality, age, and so forth) and experiences will impact not only why they play and how, but also their meaning-making processes. As the next chapter sets up an immersive methodology whereby I utilise my position as a researcher *and* a gamer in order to access certain immersive and affective elements of the gaming experience, then this thesis’ notion of the subject has to account for the relational and situated player. This relational and situated playing subject, moreover, is necessary to engage with as they are ontologically and epistemologically implied by this thesis’ methodology and chosen methods (as explored fully in the next chapter).

*Interpellation*

In order to achieve these goals, this work thus takes a poststructuralist approach to subjectivity. The subject, as I understand it, is predominantly ‘created’ and shaped by power and knowledge. Michel Foucault, following the work of Louis Althusser (1971), highlighted the states’ and institutions’ involvement in this creating and shaping of subjectivity – through both repressive and ideological state apparatuses such as the army, the church, the family, and now mass media. In considering video games’ positioning of the playing subject, this thesis draws on the concept of interpellation – particularly as considered by Althusser (1971). Interpellation describes the process whereby subjects are ‘hailed’ in social interactions (especially in political and social institutions). It is when the hailed individual recognises themselves as the addressee that the subject is constituted by this (mis)recognition. The subject is thus always ideological, and the individual is ‘always-already’ a subject (even before birth due to
the foetus being named and ideologically interpellated by society before they are born). In drawing upon interpellation, however, I do not subscribe to the notion that the process of interpellation alone constitutes subjects. That is, I believe subjects are not wholly the product of social forces. Rather, there is an interaction between the social forces which ‘hail’ the subject, ideologically ‘recognising’ and interpellating them, and the individual’s agency and ability to negotiate these social forces. The problem of what the individual is prior to hailing and to what extent the individual is free to negotiate, play with, or reject these forces is a discussion explored at length by thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek (1989) and others, and is beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, the concept of interpellation serves as a useful critical tool to think about how the various game elements structure play, inhibit agentic decision-making, and ideologically position the player.

Disciplinary Power

In its concern with questioning how specific game elements and structures could be said to interpellate the player, this thesis must consider the social, cultural, political and ideological resonances these game elements and structures may have. As such, it is important to consider the agency of the player in relation to these game structures, not only within gameplay and in-game acts, but also how they may psychically navigate these structures. To do so, I draw on Foucauldian understandings of the circulation of, and resistance to, power. For instance, in chapter five’s exploration of the accumulation of forms of game capital, the concepts of disciplinary power and technologies of the self are deployed when discussing how the structuring and rewarding of this accumulation acts in relation to the player, their agency, and motivation.

In his text, *Discipline and Punish* (1995 [1975]) Foucault describes Jeremy Bentham’s architectural plans for the Panopticon prison as ‘a magnificent machine not only for the subjection but also for self-subjection. By introducing in inmates an awareness of their own constant visibility, the Panopticon compels them to structure their own behaviour in accordance with its power mechanism’ [original emphasis] (in Hoffman, 2011: 34). The observed are rendered docile not simply through surveillance, but rather through the internalisation of the reality of their position as visible and observed subjects. In their ability to make observations, and thus gain knowledge, the
Panopticon’s observer gains power. In this way panopticonism serves to produce knowledge as well as to circulate power (Feder, 2011: 60). Foucault (1995 [1975]) termed this type of power ‘disciplinary power’. Disciplinary power is productive; it trains and shapes the actions of the body and makes it ‘more obedient as it becomes more useful’ (138). Disciplinary power (which works at an individual level) is different to, but overlaps with, biopower (whose target is the population). ‘The chief function of disciplinary power is to “train”. [...] Discipline “makes” individuals’ (Foucault, 1995 [1975]: 170, in McGushin, 2011: 133). Whereas biopower works ‘to incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it: a power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them’ (Foucault, 1978: 136, in Taylor, 2011: 43).

This understanding of the power/knowledge relationship and observer/observed interaction is useful when considering immersive gaming. In its discussion of the affective and motivational elements of gameplay mechanics which are based around, and encourage, accumulation, chapter five of this thesis engages with the relationship between the player and the player character vis-à-vis the imperative to accumulate forms of game capital and develop the player character. In order to do so, it draws upon Foucault's concepts, such as disciplinary power and technologies of the self (introduced in chapter five), to get critical access to how these game structures and gaming practices may affectively encourage certain modes of player interaction and behaviour. In so doing, I demonstrate how the structure of the game, working in a similar way to the Panopticon, mobilises a form of disciplinary power which causes the player to survey and critique not only their player character, but themselves also.

Agency and Play

Games are rule-bound spaces, but they are also sites where people can engage in play. As such, the relationship between these two necessary elements of games has received critical attention. Johan Huizinga (1949 [1938]) explored the importance of playing and concluded that not only does it predate culture, but culture is shaped and formed through play. Sociologist Roger Callois (1961), building on Huizinga’s work, considered the relationship between play and rules when developing the concepts paideia (the ‘spontaneous manifestations of the play instinct’ [27-28]) and ludus (the
game, and by necessity, its rules and restrictions). The constitutive rules of ludus enable play as they ‘prohibit use of the most efficient means for reaching a prelusory goal’ (Suits, 1978: 38), thus not only making the game more challenging, but making the game possible. As Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (2006) point out, without the rule dictating that the runners of a race have to remain in their lanes, they would each make a b-line for the finish across the centre of the racetrack (10). Indeed, without the constitutive rule that the first to cross the line was the winner, there would be no race at all. ‘Without rules to structure actions […] we would have free play or other forms of interaction, but not gameplay’ (Aarseth, 2003: 2, in King & Krzywinska, 2006: 10). Most gameplay then contains instances of both ludus and paideia. This relationship between the rule-boundedness and player agency in gaming is necessary to highlight as this thesis explores both the ludus and paideia of games. That is, both the structural and mechanical elements of AAA games, as well as examining the playful, affective, and subjective experience of gaming. I therefore follow Marcus Schulzke (2012) and understand the player’s ability to be an agent (both in their in-game actions and in the ways they passively or actively ‘negotiate’ with the game) as lying within the centralist understanding of agency (n. pag.). That is, I neither wholly subscribe to the determinism of many studies which analyse the influence of game violence on the player, or the voluntarism of studies which present the player as an agent who freely negotiates game messages. Instead my readings of the game and my responses are positioned as existing between this dichotomy.

As video gaming is a playful experience, the agency and specific freedoms which may be experienced within Callois’ (1961) ludus-paideia dynamic need to be explored. Given the elements of play and agency which are inherent in gaming, this research requires a conceptualisation of the subject which recognises its ability to perform or play with certain identities whilst also participating in a very structured mode of engagement. As such, this thesis also highlights the importance of the subject’s agency and their ability to perform, play with, and thus reveal the instability of certain structures and discourses. Although this thesis is primarily interested in questioning how the playing subject might be interpellated by the structures of the game, and questioning how they are positioned ideologically and subjectively, it is nevertheless important to remember that this does not mean the player is without agency. The rules of the game structure interaction, but players are not only able to play within those rules, but also with them. Discovering and exploiting the ‘best’ ways to utilise game
mechanics to achieve objectives is a pleasure of gaming, although the dividing line between exploiting mechanics and cheating is often blurry and dependent on player sensibility. It is also possible for the player to participate in the ludic elements of the game whilst interpreting them in a playful way. A player who follows the given objectives in a game, for instance, may still be ‘playing’ with the formal narrative by mentally role-playing alternative modes of participating in the structures of the game, such as ‘shipping’1 romances which are not possible in the actual gameplay, or giving justifications for actions which do not appear in the game narrative. In chapter six, for instance, I argue that the player can participate in game structures and yet mentally negotiate their position within them, or even resist and subvert them entirely. It is also necessary to recognise that when playing a game, people have a specific relationship to themselves:

You do not have the same type of relationship to yourself when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes to vote or speaks at a meeting and when you are seeking to fulfill your desires in a sexual relationship. Undoubtedly there are relationships and interferences between there different forms of the subject; but we are not dealing with the same type of subject. In each case, one plays, one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself.

(Foucault, 1997: 290, in Ball & Olmedo, 2013: 87)

A playing subject may be constituted and expressed differently to other subjectivities belonging to one individual. Thus, this thesis recognises that the players’ actions when they are acting through their character are not revealing something of the ‘truth’ of the player’s subjectivity. Rather, it is in the player’s mental, affective, and embodied reactions to certain gameplay structures which have the potential to reveal something of the wider cultural moment.

*Mattering and Mastery*

This thesis engages with the way the player and their actions and decisions are made to *matter* through feedback from the game. Several scholars have already noted the

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1 To ‘ship’ a romantic relationship between characters is to imagine and endorse one that may not exist in the canonical narrative.
importance of player agency and the feeling of competence in gaming. Tanya Krzywinska and Douglas Brown (2015), for instance, assert that the seduction of gaming is feeling like you have an effect on the outcome; feeling like you matter:

> What is seductive about games is the ways that they bring us into their sphere, achieved through a combination of strategies of representation such as story and ludic structure; at best, this blend works to create a compelling sense of both dramatic and ludic progression.

(197)

Feeling as though one matters in the game is a response to feedback which highlights not only one’s ability to influence, but also the ability to overcome the challenges the game presents to the player. In this thesis’s chapters four and five, I specifically trace this ‘mattering’ and how it is partially though overcoming of vulnerabilities and traumas which result in a desire to master. Some scholars have criticised a focus on player mastery. Seth Giddens and Helen Kennedy (2008), for instance, argue that the focus on mastery assigns too much agency to the player which creates an artificial player-subject/game-object dyad.

In considering this issue, Jesper Juul (2013) argues that the pleasure of video games, like tragedy, is a paradox; whilst we usually try to avoid failing, we repeatedly experience it when gaming. Juul asserts that games ‘promise us that we can repair a personal inadequacy—an inadequacy that they produce in us in the first place’ (7), and in so doing we improve our skills and, ultimately, escape failure. This, he asserts, is a central motivation for continuing to play. It is desire to overcome that motivates us, and it is the overcoming that brings us pleasure in the feeling of success and mastery. While it appears to be true that mastery is only one of the many pleasures of gaming (Giddens & Kennedy, 2008), the potential for the affective experience of overcoming and dominance, and the cultural resonances it may have, are of interest to this research. This project extends the discussions concerning failure, overcoming and mastery in its substantive analysis. I explore the affective experience of narrative trauma and gameplay vulnerability and consider how and why these devices specifically motivate the player to continue to play, ask by what means the game furnishes the player with the ability to overcome, and consider how these devices and means could be said to have specific cultural, gendered and classed resonances.
Psychoanalysis and Desire

In its ability to tell us something about how power disperses and coalesces, a Foucauldian conception of the subject allows this thesis to examine the power relations accruing to the structures of gaming and consider the interpellation of the subject. However, I also bring in an understanding of affect to this thesis’ discussion of power, especially how desire and motivation act as affective dimensions of capillary power. As Foucault did not theorise affect, this thesis’ theoretical analysis attempts to use other means to get critical purchase on the affective, agentic, and motivational. As has already been mentioned, and is highlighted in this thesis’ methodology chapter (as well as carried as a thread throughout each analysis chapter) this research follows Steinberg’s (2015) belief that knowledge has an affective dimension; it is persuasive and has ‘tendencies’ (4). It is necessary to engage with feelings and desire in order to access what Foucault termed ‘episteme’ – the conditions for knowledge (2005 [1966], in Steinberg, 2015: 5). Therefore, in order to get critical purchase on the motivational aspects of gameplay elements and structures, this thesis’ substantive chapters (especially chapters four and five) therefore also utilise cultural psychoanalysis to think about desire and motivation.

I recognise the difficulty of drawing upon both Foucauldian poststructural conceptions of the dispersion of power as well as psychoanalytic understandings of affective desire within this work. Indeed, Foucault was very critical of the normalising power and discourse of psychoanalysis as a medical practice. Yet there are scholars, such as Judith Butler (2009) and Deborah Lynn Steinberg (2015), who have successfully drawn on both schools of thought. This thesis does not theorise a relationship between the two which harmonises their differences. Rather, it holds them in tension as it seeks to reveal something about the affective, desiring experiences in relation to certain gameplay structures.

Player Investment

As ‘no theory of the avatar can be divorced from theories of the subject’ (Apter, 2008: 1), the player’s relationship to the player character must be explored before an understanding of affective and subjective engagement in gaming can be hypothesised. This thesis engages with the player’s relationship to the player character, rather than
their relationship to the avatar. Adrienne Shaw (2011) argues that identification with an avatar is different to identification with a player character (4). Avatars are relational in that they act as a mode of self-representation – a character created, inhabited, and performed in a social space. In the closed system of offline gaming, this thesis is not concerned with the representation of the self as avatar in a social context, but rather the relationship of the player to the player character as a vehicle for narrative and play experience.

In video games, the process of identification is not only visual and narrative, emotional and empathic, but also involves active haptic and interactive involvement with the game. The player not only controls and directs the player character, but often they have a certain amount of choice over the player character’s physical design, skill set, and (in very broad terms) personality. It is commonsensical to assume that video games allow for greater identification with the protagonist due to their interactive nature, but this needs to be explored. While there is evidence to support there being a greater level of identification with the player character when players are given the chance to control and direct them (Hefner et al., 2007: 4), this relationship needs to be explored in order to aid this thesis’ discussion of the potential subjectivities of violent, immersive, and spectacular games.

**Identifying with the Player Character**

In their discussion of identification with the player character, Dorothée Hefner, Christoph Klimmt, and Peter Vorderer (2007) define what they term ‘monadic’ identification as ‘feeling like’ or ‘creating the illusion to “become” a key person within a computer game’s universe’ and propose that ‘for the moment of media exposure, users adopt (parts of) the identity of the target character’ (40-41). The level to which identification in gaming is intensified by the interactivity involved is difficult to parse. Certainly, in order to understand the player’s identification with the player character, it is necessary to recognise the active involvement required by the interactivity of the medium. The gamer habitus (Kirkpartick, 2012) developed when the player internalises the controls at the beginning of a new game is part of this identificatory relationship:
Physical mastery of the game controls forms part of a body politic in which the player incorporates the game text as part of an extended self, individuating it and partly effacing the authorial vision of the developer.

(Surman, 2007: 211-12)

In his discussion of player-character relationships in games, James Newman (2002) asserts that the player does not ‘become’ a character within the gameworld; rather, they ‘encounter the game by relating to everything within the gameworld simultaneously’ (n. pag.). If this is true, then when discussing the various possible subject positions of gaming, researchers need to take into account not only the protagonist and their experience, but also the various mechanical, directive and constraining elements of the game.

Bob Rehak (2003), in his chapter ‘Playing at Being’, employs psychoanalytic techniques in his analysis of video game avatars. Through use of theories such as Lacan’s ‘mirror phase’ and Christian Metz’s work on psychoanalytic effects in order to view the avatar as a ‘primordial mirror’, Rehak posits that the game avatar is both acting as self and other for the player; that its controllability (behaviour and movement, to varying degrees) mean the player sees their avatar as themselves, whilst they are also ‘unequivocally other’ (ibid.: 106). Another scholar who uses a similar approaches to studying the avatar and the player’s identity is Miroslaw Filiciak (2003), who studies MMORPG\(^2\) avatars using scholarship such as John Suler’s notion of the ‘mechanism of transference’ in his work on management of identity in cyberspace. Filiciak posits that avatars ‘are not an escape from our “self”’, they are, rather, a longed-for chance of expressing ourselves beyond physical limitations, they are a post-modern drama being materialized’ (100). Likewise, in her exploration of the avatar as manifesting psychological drive, Emily Apter (2008) argues that the ‘the ludic dimension of self-transformation in avatar culture’ (5) is reminiscent of Freudian ‘play drive’, which gives the driver infinite possibilities without real world consequences. While this thesis is not concerned with the avatar as means of social-digital communication of the (or a) self – which is the focus of Rehak’s, Filiciak’s, and Apter’s papers – some of their

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\(^2\) MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) are online role-playing games in which players can play with others from around the world. The gameworld, usually hosted by publishers, often exist in the form of several ‘servers’ to cater to the large player populations and are usually linguistically and/or geographically demarcated. MMORPG gameworlds are ‘persistent’ (Bartle, 2003) in that they continue to exist even if no one is playing. The most popular MMORPGs can generate large revenues.
arguments are useful for conceptualising the player’s relationship to their character. Whilst, in the main, the social relations with (out-of-game) individuals are not part of the player-player character relations as they are with player-avatar relations, nevertheless the relationality between the player and their character highlighted in these thinkers’ work is still mostly relevant for this thesis’ purposes. Whilst single players in offline games are not mapped onto a social web in quite the same way as if they were playing multiplayer, they are nevertheless still ‘mirrored’ in their player character; it moves, speaks, and kills at their command and on their behalf – moving beyond the player’s physical limitations (Filiciak, 2003). Their character is both part of them and ‘unequivocally other’ (Rehak, 2003: 106). It grants the opportunity to explore possibilities without consequence (Apter, 2008).

**Narrative and Ludic Identification**

In her analysis of identification in games, Shaw (2011) found that, as with film and other media, a strong narrative increases player understanding of their characters (5). However, it is important to view gaming as a situated, interactive activity – one which is simultaneously both narrative and ludic – and question how the interactive elements of a game may inhibit or encourage identification with the player character. Along these lines of inquiry, Shaw (2011) also found that the shared goals of the player and the player character meant that, most of the time, the player wants the player character to succeed (5). This is noteworthy, as it is not always the case when we consider the spectator/protagonist relationship in other media. As video games contain set goals, and the player character is the vehicle by which those goals are achieved, usually common intent between the player and the player character is a prerequisite of gameplay. This may not be true, however, in instances where players take a moral stance on the specific actions which are a requirement of the game (for an exploration of how this is negotiated, please see chapter six), when the game does not allow the player to take a preferred approach to an issue, or when modding\(^3\) enables the player to expand, enhance, and supersede the experience of the vanilla\(^4\) game. Andrew Burn

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\(^3\) Modding describes when third-party ‘modders’ alter hardware or software. Often the new content they generate for pre-existing games is shared online within gaming communities. Comes from the term ‘modify’.

\(^4\) The term ‘vanilla’ describes the original version of a game at the time of its release, without any downloadable content (DLC), developer updates, or mods.
(2006) addresses this tension between the rules and freedoms within a game which impacts the player’s relationship to their character in his chapter ‘Playing Roles’. Using *Final Fantasy XII* (Square Enix: 1997) as a case study, Burn adopts a social semiotic approach and utilises narrative theory to analyse the main character, Cloud. The dual nature of the character as both a protagonist in the narrative and as the embodiment of the player within the game leads Burn to discuss how this interacts with both the representational and the ludic elements of the game. Burn concludes that the dual position of observing the main character’s story and playing as him is differently ‘valued’ and ‘occupied’ by different players depending on how they engage with the character, whether they appropriate or reimagine them, and how they interpret the narrative (87).

Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps (2015) draw on studies of the evocation of empathy as considered by Roland Barthes and literary theorists, as well as cognitive science, in order to consider how the player encounters trauma within a video game. Using Newman’s (2002) writing, they discuss the difference in player’s empathic reaction to their characters during ‘on-line’ play (when the player is acting significantly within the gameworld) and ‘off-line’ play (sections of the game which the player cannot influence, such as cut-scenes). They follow Newman’s argument that the player’s empathy for game characters does not exist during on-line play, as they see the player character as a vehicle for play, and other characters as merely pieces of the game. Smethurst and Craps argue that, by using thematic devices, developers can then elicit emotions in the player during less interreactive (more off-line) sections of play through highlighting the moral issues surrounding their actions. In this understanding, the player character fluctuates between being a tool during on-line play – an ‘extension of our body’ (Collins, 2011, in Smethurst & Craps, 2015: 276) to a character with which we can empathise and identify in off-line play.

Thus there are several dimensions to players’ investment in their player character. It can be seen broadly in both narrative and emotional terms, potentially akin to film and other media. Beyond this, the relationship is also haptic in that it involves direct interaction and the necessary internalisation of the system of controls. Moreover, it is ludic; the player and the player character share goals and purpose, the player ‘looks out’ for the player character, and their character acts on the player’s behalf. This does not mean that the player has to ‘become’ the player character, but their relationship is a close one in that it is simultaneously interactive, haptic, emotional, and reciprocal.
Theoretical Framework

The relationship between the player and their character can also be seen to fluctuate and shift depending on the mode of interaction at that precise moment. The literature which explores players’ investment in the player character, the gameworld and the game outcome is picked up in chapter four’s discussion of affective attachment to these game elements as intensified by various narrative tropes and mechanic structures.

*The Player Character as an Everyman*

It has been theorised that when the protagonist is a character presented as an ‘everyman’, it encourages the spectator to emotionally and empathically invest in them, even as they take part in spectacular or unbelievable plotlines. The everyman protagonist’s ‘blank persona seems to be designed to enable a multitude of identifications and draw the spectator into empathizing with his subject position’ (Straw, 2011: 93). Like the movie protagonist, the video game player character can act as an ‘everyman’ whose blank-slate-like quality allows the player to project their own thoughts and feelings onto them. This is reminiscent of Deborah Lynn Steinberg’s (2009) work discussed in chapter two, in which she considers how knowledge comes to be plausible and powerful through the ‘filling in’ the viewer performs within the empty spaces. Although Steinberg’s theorising is in a context of genes and scientific discourse, a similar mode of engagement takes place when one plays as an ‘everyman’ player character – their empty space(s) require the player to ‘fill in’, thus enabling myriad levels of phantasmatic projection. This ‘filling-in’ is one mechanism which facilitates player-player character identification.

Several characters in this study fit the ‘everyman’ description in basic terms in that they are not voiced and thus do not speak with a voice other than the player’s own. Thus they potentially avoid the dissonance which may be created through a character whose voice, gender, accent and so forth do not match the player’s. This lack of a voiced player character can also aid identification as the character does not necessarily state opinions which may be at odds with the player’s own. Similarly, some protagonists are never seen by the player, and serve merely as the vehicle for play. For example, in *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2012) the player takes control of ex-soldier turned private investigator Booker DeWitt. Over the course of the game they only see his face when it is briefly reflected back at them on the surface of water. The player experiences the spectacular and dystopic floating city of Columbia through his
eyes and takes on enemies whilst embodied as him. As with most first person (hereafter FP) perspectives (discussed separately below), the only part of Booker visible to the player is his hands when they are raised in combat (see fig. 2.1). Such characters appear to act as an everyman in that they function as a blank slate on which the player can project various emotions and thus avoid personality dissonance, potentially inhibiting their connection with that character. In her study of identification with player characters, Shaw (2011) highlights how her interviewees identify with a set character whose storyline is fleshed out and as a character who functions as a blank slate (8). As such, the modes of identification, investment and empathic connection can be seen to be dependent – at least in part – on the way the character is presented to the player, as well as how developed and independent their personality is.

As with BioShock Infinite (2012), many AAA titles adopt a FP perspective when shaping the visual design of the game. In filmic terms, the action is deployed through a visual convention of protagonist point of view. It affords the player a view of the area unblocked by the character’s form, as well as creating a tactical ‘blind spot’ behind their field of vision allowing for certain manoeuvres to be employed. This perspective has become associated with the shooter genre of games.5 In his study of

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5 Not all shooters are first person, however, and not all first-person games are shooters.
points of view, player preference, and reported levels of immersion, Paul Cairns (2015) concludes that FP perspectives are more immersive irrespective of the player’s preference. However, the relationship between immersion and identification is complicated. As I go on to explore in chapter three, to be immersed in a world does not necessarily indicate a high level of identification with the protagonist, and to identify strongly with a player character does not require a deep level of immersion. They are distinct categories which share some common features.

**Character Creation**

The player’s level of identification with the player character is enhanced when the character is one which the player is able to create themselves (Shaw, 2011: 10). As many titles allow for some physical selection (see fig. 2.2) and usually contain a form of mechanical (skills based) selection, then the player character functions as part of the immersive fantasy for the player. They can create a character whom they both wish to inhabit and with whom they can potentially identify (be that via creating an avatar of themselves who looks and acts as they would, or choosing to role-play as a character).

![Character creation in The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011)](image)

**Figure 2.2**
Character creation in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011)

In RPGs, the player’s avatar is not only controlled by the player, but is also built by them. Often, everything from gender, appearance, sexuality, backstory, fighting style,
specialisation in certain types of weaponry, attributes (for instance, health, stamina, strength, or mana [magic] if the player is a magic user) and abilities (such as intelligence, charisma, persuasiveness, or the ability to pick locks and pockets) is crudely determined by the player’s selections. As some games give the opportunity to shape a character’s appearance, attributes, or even personality, it might seem commonsensical that the player character could then be thought of as an extension of the player’s self. Indeed, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Mirosław Filiciak (2003) concluded his study into RPG avatars by arguing that player characters are an expression of, not an escape from, players’ selves. This belief is not without its caveats or problems, however. Any avatar, despite the player’s ability to create and shape that character, is still part of a story which is, for the most part, beyond the player’s control. Even though many current games contain hypertext dialogue instead of non-interactive cutscenes where the player can (to some degree) select their response, the player character is never fully controllable: there are only a few options given for dialogue, the story follows a general structure (perhaps with several paths to choose from); and even if the player chooses to ignore the story and do something like going on a killing rampage, there are often limits such as NPCs who are unable to be killed.

It is clear from this discussion that the player’s identificatory relationship to their player character can be affected by many elements of representation and genre. This thesis aims to explore how certain narrative conventions and mechanical structures function to further attach the player to both their player character and the game’s outcome. The final section of this chapter sets up this thesis’ understanding of immersion in order to contextualise the following (methodology) chapter.

**Immersion**

The concept of immersion is relevant to many fields of research from language learning to the development of virtual reality technology. Several media users and critics (especially those who discuss highly interactive media such as video games) have posited not only that it is a key component of their interaction with media but also that it is what makes that interaction enjoyable (Jennett et al., 2008: 4). Yet this media effect remains under-theorised (Cairns et al., 2006: 2). Because there are several lenses through which one can study immersion, its origins, and its effects, there is not yet complete consensus between academics as to the definition of immersion and its
key elements. Diane Carr (2006b) notes that, for different scholars, ‘immersion, as a concept, implies different things depending on whether it is borrowed from literary theory, virtual reality analysis or presence theory’ (53). Many, such as Marie-Laure Ryan (2001: 18), follow Janet Murray’s (1997) assertion that immersion is the feeling of being transported to a fictional world; akin to being submerged in water (98-99). Words such as ‘transformed’, ‘enveloped’, and ‘being there’ often emerge in the literature (e.g. Dyson, 2009: 1), but gaining a theoretical and critical purchase on such an experiential and subjective concept is challenging. Frans Mäyrä (2008) notes that, ‘for different scholars, immersion as a concept implies different things depending on whether it is borrowed from literary theory, virtual reality analysis or presence theory’ (53).

Michael Lombard and Theresa Ditton (1997) recognise two distinct categories of immersion: technological – the specific elements of a system which produce immersion; and phenomenological – what Carr (2006b) terms the user’s ‘imaginative investment’ (54) in the virtual world. King and Krzywinska (2006) term these distinctions perceptual immersion and psychological immersion respectively, and they suggest terming the latter ‘absorption’ in order to distinguish between the two (118). Alison McMahan (2003), likewise, recognises that the term immersion is often used when discussing both the diegetic (the story) and nondiegetic (mechanics and strategy) levels of the game experience (68). In Murray’s (1997) definition of the three ways to produce immersion – through seamless interaction via the interface (103), by structuring participation with a visit to the virtual world (106), and by structuring participation through use of an ‘mask’ or avatar (112) – she is predominantly addressing the technological immersion one can have in the gameworld. She also acknowledges the player’s role in what she terms the ‘active creation of belief’ (110). Barry Atkins (2003) recognises phenomenological immersion as being the idea that the ‘player is “in” the action’ (158) and links it to FP games whereby the player sees the gameworld through the eyes of the player character. He also asserts that once immersion has been achieved via a screen, the player remains immersed unless attention is drawn to the interface (66). This understanding of the opposing relationship between immersion and interaction is problematic when studying games, however, as video games are both immersive and interactive (Ryan, 2001).
Immersion in Games Studies

These categories of immersion have subsequently been built upon and expanded by games designers and theorists. Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä (2005) create the SCI-model of immersion, which identifies three types of immersion: cognitive; sensory, or spatial; and emotional (sometimes termed narrative or imaginative immersion) (8). In his adaptation of Ermi and Mäyrä’s model, Dominic Arsenault (2005) proposes an SSF-model comprised of sensory immersion – where the focus of the senses is on that in which the person is immersed; systemic immersion – ‘when one accepts that a system governing a mediated object replaces the system governing a similar facet of unmediated reality’ (51); and fictional immersion – where the person believes there is more to the immersive world than is represented. Although the SSF-model was developed in order to theorise the immersive effect of gaming, none of these three types of immersion necessitate technological mediation; indeed, we could apply them to the immersive plays Josephine Machon (2013) discusses in her work in that they engage the senses, have a system of rules (which the immersant\(^6\) must ‘buy into’), and represent a fictional world beyond the scope of what transpires in the play. Arsenault (2005) specifically mentions mediation in his definition of systemic immersion. However I believe that the user’s acceptance of the rules of the immersive world (be it a game, novel, or play) is the key component of this definition and this type of immersion. For example, in immersive theatre the rules of the play (i.e. the rules of the world created and the way the actors and audience-participants may or may not act within this world) are understood and followed by immersants; if an actor or a fellow audience-participant breaks the rules then the immersion could be broken.

There has been criticism of the theoretical handling of immersion within games studies. Jesper Juul (2005) argues that Murray’s (1997) definition of immersion as being transported to a virtual world is misleading when applied to the study of video games. He states that players may be ‘absorbed by the game as a real-world activity, and the player may for the duration of the game or in isolated parts of the game also strongly imagine the fictional game world’ (Juul, 2005: 190) and that ‘focusing exclusively on coherent world and well formed storytelling is a misunderstanding of what games are about’ (ibid.: 190). There are also issues surrounding the

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\(^6\) The ‘immersant’ refers to the person who immerses themselves/is immersed in the medium.
epistemological understanding of immersion – Scott McCracken (1998) criticises any understanding of immersion which presents the player as passively consuming games (118). These issues have to be addressed both theoretically and methodologically before any study involving immersion can be undertaken.

In order to address these issues, this thesis studies immersion via immersive discourse analysis. This method of ‘playing the game’ rather than observing the game allows me to not only view gaming as a situated real world activity, but, as this method is similar in some respects to memory work, I am able to discuss the ‘imagining’ (which Juul [2005] asserts is a necessary part of gaming) that takes place when one is immersed in interactive play. This method, outlined in detail in the next chapter, also allows this thesis to address McCracken’s (1998) concern that a study into the immersive elements of gaming establishes the player as a passive consumer of games. Indeed, in the discussion of immersion and the ideological and gendered resonances and subject positions of gaming structures, this thesis views the player as an active participant, both in terms of physical interaction and imaginative projection.

**Stages of Immersion**

In their study of degrees of immersion using grounded theory, Emily Brown and Paul Cairns (2004) identified three different degrees of involvement with the game which can subsequently be reached if the barriers to their effect are not removed. The first level, engagement, requires the player to invest their time, attention, and effort. The second level, engrossment, is when a player becomes emotionally invested in the game. The final level, ‘total immersion’, is often elusive and fleeting, requiring the player to feel ‘cut off from reality’ and as though they are ‘in the game’ (3). Multiple barriers prohibit the progression of immersion through the various stages – for level one, user investment, comfort with the genre and skill with the interface; for level two, a well-constructed and impressive gameworld, and for level three, user attachment and empathy (ibid.). These distinct levels of immersion are not necessarily restricted to the effects of gaming and could be easily reconceptualised in order to describe the degrees of involvement during the act of reading or watching a film. Indeed, Brown and Cairns (2004) assert that ‘immersion as understood by gamers [...] is] comparable to immersion in reading and film’ (in Cairns et al., 2006: 1). For example, a movie-goer may feel engagement during the act of watching the film as they have a fixed period
of uninterrupted time in which to become engaged; they may become engrossed when the film is structured in such a way as to emotionally affect the viewer and when they mentally allow themselves to be involved to an emotional degree; and they may even potentially experience moments of total immersion, however brief.

Some of the theoretical confusion regarding the definition and utilisation of immersion as a concept is due to the conflation of terms with the overlapping effects of flow and presence. It is beneficial, then, to also define these terms so that their overlap with immersion can be understood and any conflation of them as effects of gaming can be avoided. Flow is defined as an optimal, extreme experience, where one is so engrossed in the activity that nothing else matters. It is often the effect produced when one is feeling ‘in the zone’. Although being similar to the experience of ‘total immersion’, Jennett et al. (2008) argue that flow is not the same as a state of high immersion because one of the components of flow (as outlined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in 2008 [1990]) is that there are clear goals; however, not all games which are understood to be immersive have distinct goals (e.g. Myst) and thus flow and immersion are distinct but overlapping categories (Jennett et al., 2008: 6). Presence, likewise, is an extreme experience often described as the effect produced where a media user feels as though they have been transported into the world of the text with which they are engaged (among other definitions) (Lombard & Ditton, 1997: n. pag.). It is consequently often associated with virtual reality, and is understood as being a ‘state of mind’ (Jennett et al., 2008: 7). Therefore, although there is significant overlap between the experience of total immersion and presence, we can see from Brown and Cairn’s (2004) three stages of immersion idea discussed above, one does not necessarily need to experience presence in order to feel immersed. Throughout this research, I centre my discussion around the broader concept of immersion as it is the effect which best allows us to study the nature of ‘immersive’ media, in that it is graded, relies partly on structures within the text, and it enables an analysis of the researcher’s involvement and affective attachment with their object of study.

**Critical Awareness**

While interactivity has been hyped as a panacea for evils ranging from social disempowerment to writer’s block, the concept of immersion has suffered a vastly
It has been argued by some that a media user cannot be immersed in a text whilst also maintaining the distance necessary for critical reflection. Jay Bolter (1991) argues that virtual reality (‘VR’ – by which he means technological and psychological immersion in a fictional world, be it literary or virtual) necessitates an abandoning of the user’s critical faculties and that VR is ‘a medium of precepts rather than signs’ (230, in Ryan, 2001: 10). Ryan (2001) counters this claim with her belief that becoming immersed in a literary world is a complex mental activity and that concentration is required in order to insert the reader into an imaginative reality (11). To this assertion I would add two further considerations. Firstly, if we draw upon the three stages of immersion perspective, the abandoning of ‘the critical self’ is not required for a low or even medium level of immersion to be achieved. It is not necessarily true that as one becomes involved with the text they are progressively blind or passive to the semiotic nature of it. Theories of meaning-making and reader response have demonstrated that, when people read, the signs within the text are not merely being passively converted into one set meaning. Stanley Fish (1980), for instance, believes that readers are part of an ‘interpretive community’ and make meaning from texts vis-à-vis their specific cultural contexts. Each individual makes their own meaning from the text whether they read critically or immersively and these meanings are in part informed by the text and the individual’s process of engaging with the text. Meaning-making from games, as with any text, is a negotiated and multifaceted process. Therefore, as a researcher of games and affect, it behoves me to consider practising an immersive method in order to understand how different levels of engagement with the text might produce different meanings, interpretations, and affective responses. Secondly, I would also add to Ryan’s assertion by arguing that the rejection of engaging immersively with a text in order to maintain critical objectivity only serves to narrows the scope of the research. By acknowledging my inability to be completely unbiased and objective, through discussing my subjective experience of attachment and the emotions elicited by my involvement with the text, I can add another dimension of analysis to their study whilst making the research process more transparent.
Scott McCracken (1998) criticises any understanding of immersion which positions the player as a passive consumer of games (118). In her conceptualisation of immersion, Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) saw the player as being ‘both inside and outside at the same time, in a virtual world and playing at controlling that world’ (Walkerdine, 2007: 18). Following both McCracken and Ryan, I choose to think of immersion not as being a purely passive process antithetical to critical thinking, I believe that immersion needs to be conceptualised as being both active and passive. It is active in that it requires not only physical effort (to become au fait with the genre and controls) but also active imaginative and emotional engagement on the part of the immersant. It is passive in that the creation and sustaining of an immersive state relies in part upon the software and hardware to function such that the state is not disrupted. This method of immersively playing the game rather than observing play allows me to not only ground my understanding of gaming as a situated activity, but as it involves reflecting on the praxis of gaming, it allows me to discuss the ‘imagining’ that takes place when one is immersed in interactive play.

Negative Emotions as a Hindrance to Immersive States

Research into players’ reactions to witnessing ethical acts and making moral decisions in games has found that negative emotional reactions can be elicited in various ways; if players consider their immoral in-game decisions to be ‘non-justifiable’ decisions they can experience negative affects (Weaver and Lewis, 2012; Hartmann et al., 2010). It is clear in this example how the moral disengagement tactics discussed in the previous chapter have a part to play, as narrative tropes (such as the good vs. evil dichotomy) can thus allow players to avoid these negative emotional reactions through positioning these acts as ‘justifiable’. In their examination of violent gaming and player emotions when dehumanising characters and providing moral justification, Tilo Hartmann and Peter Vorderer (2010) found that players who are aware that ‘this is just a game’ have a lower reported incidence of guilt and negative effects from ‘unethical’ in-game acts (108). When exploring the question of how ethical acts are handled within immersive spaces/with players’ immersive states this is crucial to note as, although negative affects such as anxiety can co-exist with immersive states (Jennett et al., 2008) it has been shown that certain negative emotions – such as guilt – could potentially serve to reduce or impede immersion (Cairns et al., 2006: 2). This is because the ‘moral
dissonance’ experienced when witnessing or enacting an act perceived as immoral can act as a barrier to players emotionally investing in the game; emotional investment which is necessary for the second level of immersion. In their paper ‘Moral Emotions and Moral Behaviours’, June Price Tangney, Jeff Stuewig and Debra J. Mashek (2007) found that guilt, in its ability to facilitate empathic processes, encourages individuals to make what they perceive to be more moral decisions. However when participating in a game where these moral choices are not offered to the player, how can we then explain why players who may experience a guilt response to violent and immoral acts may go on to not only reduce or negate these negative affects, but also enjoy and become immersed in violent gameplay?

This Thesis’ Use of Immersion

This thesis proposes that an immersive participatory analysis whereby researchers openly and visibly research video games through play could be a useful tool which enables them to potentially gain insight and get critical purchase on elements of both the game and experience of play which other methods of visual analysis, on their own, do not address. I believe it is a valid mode of analysis due to the interactive nature of video games. It also enables myself as a researcher of video games to utilise my position as an ‘insider’. This perspective is not only considered to be essential for understanding video games by some members of the gaming community, but it also provides insight into the experience of gaming. In order to analyse many different elements of the game (such as the differing experiences of difficulty levels), or in order to be able to play the narrative through to completion, games scholars must have certain skills and a level of familiarity with a game’s controls and the user interface. In addition, this method allows me, when combined with other qualitative methods, to analyse not only the media elements of the game, but to also discuss the game’s mechanics and immersive elements which can only be revealed through gameplay.

Naturally, the video game researcher who engages in an analysis of representation and mechanical gameplay elements is most likely already someone who plays themselves and uses that gameplay to fuel their discussion (perhaps through an implementation of more traditional media analytic tools, such as semiotics or discourse analysis). However, by rendering their position visible, both myself and others who undertake research into video games could engage with the immersive dimension of
Theoretical Framework

gameplay and thus utilise a critical tool for further understanding which would develop and deepen their discussion. To this end, this thesis is attempting to not only further the field of games studies, but is proposing that a mode of immersive engagement can be employed as a method such that the theoretical discussions surrounding immersion, engagement, and affect be extended by this research.

Other Critical Tools

Along with an understanding of the affective, immersive elements of gameplay, a number of other critical tools are deployed in this thesis’ analysis. Drawing upon social semiotics and feminist theory allows this thesis to consider the specific cultural resonances of the experiential, affective and immersive elements of gameplay.

Social Semiotics

In order to unpack the cultural, social and gendered resonances of experiential, affective and immersive elements of gameplay, this thesis draws upon various concepts from critical and media theory. The notions of genre and spectacle are drawn upon within the substantive chapters in order to critically assess the specific narrative tropes and mechanical conventions of the games studied. Doing so enables this thesis to discuss affective, provoking, and common elements to these games, such as the witnessing of suffering and trauma, (bio)dystopian narrative settings, and ethical decision-making.

In considering the narrative and mechanic structures which encourage certain forms of play, or limit modes of player interaction, this thesis draws on the notion of ‘preferred readings’. Through considering the preferred readings of a text, scholars are able to consider its dominant ideology. In considering what may be the preferred reading of a text, it is not possible to thus infer that all readers would read it in the same way. Indeed, many people, due to their subjective and varied lived experiences, read a text in many different ways. They can negotiate with the text if their social-cultural-historical position inflects the preferred reading of that text. Or, if their position conflicts with the preferred reading they may read oppositionally – that is, ‘against the grain’. In this examination, I am not interested in examining players’ responses to games and categorizing them into these three categories – which could be
seen as overly rigid. Rather, I draw on the notion of ‘preferred readings’ merely to highlight the way in which game structures could be said to ‘encourage’ a particular mode of playing. Naturally, this concept needs to be adapted order to be relevant to the gamespace. While the narratology/ludology debate outlined in the previous chapter means discussions of narrative have to be carefully handled when discussing games, it is nevertheless true that, in AAA games, there is a ‘grain’ both to the narrative and the gameplay. However, unlike other media such as film, TV and literature, that grain can branch, diverge, and be somewhat flexible to allow for the space to play more freely. Whilst it can also re-join at certain points. For instance, in Deus Ex: Human Revolution (Eidos Montreal, 2011), the player can choose how to handle enemies in various ways – many can be avoided entirely, put to sleep, stealthily killed, or the player can elect to charge in ‘all guns blazing’. This allows for many divergent paths of game experience. Nevertheless, all paths converge when reaching the boss, who can only be engaged directly and lethally. It is clear then that certain forms of play are ‘locked in’. That is not to say that they cannot be played oppositionally. Indeed, one could play Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (Bethesda, 2011) and never complete a quest – choosing instead to just wander and explore. However, for game progression to occur, to unlock achievements, and ‘complete’ the game, the player is usually required to engage in a mode of ‘preferred playing’.

Feminist Theory

Feminism and gender as a mode of analysis have been important in the conception, development and implementation of this research project. Feminist theories about knowledge, subjectivity, and reflexivity inform the methods laid out in the following chapter. This thesis’ substantive chapters deploy a mode of feminist analysis as one of their analytic tools. In analysing the structures, rules, narrative tropes, and other elements of gameplay, this thesis questions how the player engages with these elements, what ideological resonances playing ‘with the grain’ of the game could be said to have, and whether the player could thus be said to be placed within certain

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7 Unless one is playing the director’s cut edition (Eidos Montreal: 2013) in which the player is given the option of ‘stealthing’ the boss battles. Killing the boss is still, however, non-negotiable.

8 A ‘quest’ is a task to be completed for a reward or for narrative progression. The term quest can imply main quest (activities which have to be completed in order to progress the narrative), as opposed to an optional sidequest.
(gendered or classed) subject positions or encouraged to identify with particular political or ideological views. In considering these subjectivities, I utilise a gendered lens as a means of further questioning the way the player could be said to be interpellated by gameplay. In this section, I establish my use of gender and how I understand it to be important in the context of this thesis’ discussion.

In Western society, gender is problematically (and erroneously) organised into a binary system. This system is hierarchical, exhaustive and mutually exclusive. As it is mutually exclusive, everything can therefore be seen to be attached to certain formations, understandings, and performances of gender. This mutual exclusivity means that everyday elements of life have specific gendered resonances – that is, they are coded as masculine or feminine. This thesis recognises the multiplicity, fluidity, relationality, performativity, and socio-cultural basis of gender and specific gendered presentations. I certainly do not wish to uphold the false binary of gender in asserting that certain game elements are either masculine or feminine. Nevertheless, I believe it is important to question how these game elements, when viewed within a specific social, cultural, and historical context, may be said to have gendered or classed resonances, and consider what the repercussions of this might be. Although both femininities and masculinities were considered during the conception of this research, and throughout the analysis phase, ultimately the gameplay elements chosen to be substantively discussed have mostly, I argue, specific masculine resonances. This does not mean, however, that other elements of gameplay did not have feminine resonances, or that I believe these elements of gameplay to be the most important or significant. Rather, given the methodological goals of this thesis and the need to focus on the affective and immersive elements of gameplay, the material for the substantive chapters was chosen because it represented the most emotive (and affectively difficult or painful) material from my research journal – it represents, for me, the affective journey I undertook during the course of the research phase.

In discussing the masculine resonances of the gameplay elements discussed in chapters four and five, it is necessary to maintain awareness that masculinity is multiple. Raewyn Connell (1995), when discussing the hegemony of masculinity and the specific privileged markers of manhood, recognises that multiple forms of masculinity exist, and that they are differently valued. Likewise, in her analysis of gender and the relational, affective practises of gaming, Walkerdine (2007) follows Connell’s assertion that masculinity is multiple, and highlights both its relation to the
other (the feminine) as well as its relation to the hegemonic ideal. She also highlights the consideration of gender when thinking about affective knowledge:

If we prioritise intuition and sensation, are we not bringing in the feminine? How does this square with the idea that games offer masculine ego confirmation and a fantasy of omnipotence? We will see that ‘feeling your way around’ the virtual space has to be counterpointed by the ego confirmation precisely to confirm masculine rationality, control and dominance.

(Walkerdine, 2007: 27)

This thesis considers the positioning of the player through elements of gameplay through a gendered lens by assessing the potential attached gendered resonances of these gameplay elements. It engages with and extend existing debates – such as those Walkerdine alludes to here – which have shown that many elements of gameplay (such as omnipotence, overcoming, and mastery) have masculine resonances. However, it also explores the way these idealised modes of play can be interrupted, fractured, or denied by the game at certain points – potentially positioning the player in a feminised or victimised position. It considers how this denial or fracturing can work to affectively engage or motivate the player.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the theoretical framework and key analytic tools adopted in this thesis. It has explored the previous approaches to the study of affect and immersion both within gaming and beyond in order to set up this thesis’ handling of these concepts. It has interrogated subjectivity within a gaming context and outlined the previous literature on player-player character identification. As many studies involving immersion and video games discuss the technological interpretation of immersion rather than the phenomenological, this thesis attempts to draw the two interpretations closer together in order to understand how the former interacts with and alters the latter through an analysis of the video game as a medium. Thus, I believe this thesis not only extends the debates surrounding the means and methods of studying games, but offer new insights on how these feminist and media-studies theories can be employed to understand immersive praxis.
In the next chapter, this study’s methods and methodology are outlined, including an immersive method building on the research discussed here. This method allows me to utilise my knowledge and skills as a gamer with specific game genres, controls, and player vocabularies. Moreover, in so doing, it allows me to get critical purchase on how the immersive character of video games can interact with their goals, rewards and ethical systems to produce various affective and social resonances and gendered or classed subject positions. Through building upon the research discussed within this chapter, this method – in conjunction with a social semiotic and textual approach – enables me to explore, through visual, audial, technological, and immersive aspects, the embodied and affective dimensions of immersive gameplay; to deconstruct the normative and transgressive elements of game mechanics vis-a-vis the ‘ethical field’ of gaming; and to theorise how immersive interaction with the gameworld can create specific (gendered) subjectivities.
The Immersive Method

Many researchers who study video games and gaming practices have noted that it is not the question of why games are worthy of attention which is most challenging; rather, it is the means by which we can get a critical purchase on games and gaming which requires careful thought and academic discussion (Mäyrä, 2008: 2-3; Buckingham, 2006: 1). Given the multiple and varied elements which comprise the gaming experience as discussed in the previous chapter, how do we study video games both as a game but also as a media form, a practise, and an experience (both social and solitary)? Accounting for the many modes of interaction possible both with and within a game, what methods might best enable an interrogation of the specific themes and questions of this project?

This chapter outlines the rationale and process for the research methods utilised in this thesis. It begins by briefly outlining the games which are examined, as well as the chosen methods, before turning to a discussion of the particular methodological issues faced by scholars who study video games. The method of autoethnography – a key tool for developing this thesis’ immersive method – is outlined and discussed, specifically regarding issues of subjectivity, objectivity and knowledge. This discussion sets up the later section of this chapter which outlines this thesis’ developed methods. This chapter then makes the case for viewing knowledge as ‘situated’ (Haraway, 1988) and outlines the notion of ‘strong objectivity’ (Harding, 1991) to which this research aspires. After which, the specific methods employed in this research are fully mapped out and examined; namely, qualitative content analysis, followed by a discussion of the second method – a mode of immersive participatory discursive analysis which is akin to autoethnography. This section of chapter three then fully outlines which games were specifically examined during this thesis’ data collection and explains why the decision was made to narrow the focus on this group of games. Following that, the intricacies of this thesis’ collection, handling, and analysis of data is outlined. This chapter closes with discussions of the usefulness of the proposed methods as well as various issues which arose during the course of practising the immersive methodology developed here.
Outline of the Games and Methods

Before turning to the particular methodological and epistemological issues which this research needs (and seeks) to address, I briefly outline the games chosen and methods deployed in order to note the potentially problematic elements which require particular attention in this chapter. I selected 13 titles which were released in the half decade leading up to the start of this project’s research period. The 13 titles include a trilogy. Consequently, 15 separate games were analysed: *Dishonored* (Arcane Studios, 2012); *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011); *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009); *Halo: Reach* (Bungie, 2010); *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013); *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal, 2011); *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2012); *Fable III* (Lionhead Studios, 2010); *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013); *Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception* (Naughty Dog, 2011); *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010); *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013), and the *Mass Effect* trilogy (BioWare, 2007-2012). Where possible, the release date was between 2011 and 2013 inclusively. However, other elements of the game were privileged over date of release relative to their importance to the methodology. At the end of this chapter I fully outline the rationale for this research’s selection criteria, but a brief summary of the criteria is as follows: the games were all billed as immersive, popular, developed by AAA studios, adult (rated 15 or over), and between them gave a range of genres, mechanics, and narratives. When considering the range of mechanics, I particularly privileged mechanics with which I already possess playing skills as this meant I did not have to undergo a ‘learning curve’ in order to develop the gamer habitus (Kirkpatrick, 2012) needed for success. Thus, I could more easily play them to the ‘expert’ degree required to access many elements of the game and every difficulty level. This high level of skill also better enabled me to become immersed in gameplay, as I had internalised the controls and did not find the combat overly difficult. The titles were played intensively and repetitively, using the metagame\(^1\) to inform various styles of play. I undertook a mode of qualitative content analysis (method one) designed to interrogate various game elements and structures, whilst also keeping an immersive

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\(^1\) As mentioned in the introduction, ‘metagame’ refers to elements of the game which are outside of the game itself. This could include ‘walkthroughs’ (strategy guides), the achievement system, the PlayStation Network, player message boards, fan art, game criticism and so on.
research journal (method two), which charted my affective response to the experiences of playing the games,

**Methodology and Epistemology**

This thesis works within a feminist research tradition and employs a post-structural understanding of the construction of knowledge; that is, that there is not one way, directed and intended by the author, in which the text can be read. Rather, there are many possible interpretations and meanings which can be understood from the text which are dependent on the relationship between author, text, and reader, and often informed by the cultural, historical and social location of both the text’s creation and its reading. Nevertheless, as I outlined in the previous chapter, in exploring the possibilities within the games studied and the structures which constrain and direct player activity, this research explores both ‘preferred’ playing and those modes of play which may go ‘against the grain’ to build up a picture of potential engagement and affective response.

The scholar who examines media texts is as much a part of the process of research as those who study specific cultures or populations. It is important to acknowledge the researcher’s active involvement when they ‘read’ the text as they perform their analysis. As this thesis is concerned with the analysis of video games, this issue is further complicated due to what Jesper Juul (2001) termed the ‘gameness’ of games. According to his classic game model, in deciding what comprises a game, several elements concerning the relationship between the player and the game must be present (such as effort and the game’s valorisation of outcomes). This is because games are playable. When one studies a game they have to interact with it, and a consequence of this interaction is that they then influence the game (Kücklich, 2002). Thus, when I perform research into video games I am not only necessarily involved with various game elements (such as story and rules), but also in the process of meaning-making from these elements of gameplay (Malliet, 2007: para. 9). By employing and adapting elements of autoethnography and autobiography when studying interactive media such as video games, I can thus situate and articulate the interactive, immersive experiences of that activity and potentially draw upon my own experiences as part of their analyses.
Autoethnography and Autobiography

In developing and undertaking a method which builds on theoretical understandings of immersion, I must reflect critically upon my own relationship to the games and then document this interaction such that the data produced can be drawn upon, discussed, and used to extend the findings from my other method. By practising a method which explores my own attachment, I believe I can gain insight into how that attachment impacts my research, changes the way I read, and affects the meanings I ascribe to the game. The immersive method outlined in this chapter situates myself, the researcher as the subject, and also partially the object of my research. Therefore it is important that in developing this immersive method, elements of autobiography and autoethnography are discussed as they inform and are incorporated into this method.

Autoethnography as a research method utilises and analyses the researcher’s personal experience of being embedded within the specific process or culture being studied. As a process, autoethnography contains both ethnographic and biographic reflections – that is, reflections on the culture in which the researcher is embedded as well as their own history and experience which shape their relationship to the research subject. It requires academics to engage in a high level of reflexivity as it connects the cultural to the personal through its ability to view the social aspects of the personal experience of the researcher (Ettore, 2005: 536). These personal experiences are reflexively documented using elements of autoethnography, allowing the author to refract their interpretations (ibid.). Using elements of autoethnography as part of a research method allows this thesis to articulate the experience of gaming whilst also performing a more structured analysis through the use of another method. In deploying autoethnography as a key method of analysis, the contingent nature of the construction of knowledge can be highlighted in that it is located in a particular time and space. However, whilst doing so, there is a danger of positioning ‘my experience as the norm, against which others would be judged’ (Letherby, 2002: para. 5.6). This issue needs to be recognised, discussed and negotiated within this chapter.

Despite this methodological tension, I believe that including elements of autoethnography and autobiography are both useful and necessary when one is studying video games and gaming due to their ‘gameness’ (Juul, 2001). Unlike studying gamers and gamer cultures, investigating games themselves requires an interactive, ‘hands-on’ approach due to their interactive components. When one
studies the game as an artefact, the researcher is required to interact with it. Following
the previous chapter’s discussion of levels of immersion, due to the development of
skills necessary to success and the amount of focus and involvement required when
playing, it is clearly not possible to successfully interact with a game without reaching
at least a low level of immersion. Incorporating modes of autoethnography as part of
the research method allows me to recognise my own role in the creation of knowledge
through the ‘story’ of my play experiences. Likewise, autobiography as a research
method requires the writer to acknowledge their situation and background in order to
show how they are part of the construction (as opposed to the ‘discovery’) of
knowledge. Following this line of thinking, I believe it is important to recognise and
highlight my role in the construction of knowledge as, irrespective of the methods
undertaken, elements of the researcher’s self are always present in the research they
produce. This could be said to be even more pertinent when one is studying interactive,
immersive media, such as video games. In undertaking the immersive method outlined
later in this chapter therefore, I can respond to these issues by not ‘assum[ing]
objectivity but, instead privileg[ing] positionality and subjectivity’ (Reissman, 2000: 3).

Objectivity and Subjectivity

This research rejects the notion that there are eternal truths which can only be accessed
through completely objective, ‘scientific’ methods. I want ‘not so much to convey the
facts of what happened [but] to convey the meanings I [attach] to experience’ [original
emphasis] (Ellis, 1999: 674). However, I accept that in order to make a contribution to
knowledge, the research process undertaken in this thesis cannot merely generate
entirely subjective, unreproducible, and experiential data. Dianne Millen’s (1997)
account of how she negotiated these tensions in her research is useful here:

Whilst I do not believe that there is some sort of final, complete reality, and I am
aware that my own subjectivity as a female feminist scientist has affected the
outcome of my research. I do believe in a compromise between a completely
subjective, unique and creative account of experience and a partly reducible,
objective and contextualised understanding in which my subjectivity has been
critiqued. [...] A focus on *experience in method* does not mean a rejection of the need to be critical, rigorous and accurate. [original emphasis]

(8.5, in Letherby, 2002: para. 3.8)

Therefore, the embracing of a more subjective, experience based research method needs to be tempered with an understanding of the self that will shape and undertake the process. That is, performing this research requires me to be reflexive about my own position and how it interacts with both my experiences and my assumptions when undertaking data collection. Replacing ‘value-free objectivity’, this ‘conscious subjectivity’ is important to recognise when scholars interacts with the object researched, as it ‘helps break down the power relationship between the researcher and the researched’ (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993: 72). In so doing, methods such as autobiography and autoethnography can highlight the situated, subjective nature of research by bringing to light the subjective decisions made during the course of the research (Harding, 1993, in Hesse-Biber, 2012: 10) instead of obscuring the self that produced it. They highlight the ‘diffraction’ (Haraway, 1997) – that is, the interference patterns of differential readings – of the researcher’s situated and subjective observations and the knowledge they produce as part of the research process (Haraway, 1988).

*Reflexivity*

When undertaking qualitative research, the researcher can be understood to be ‘situated’ (Haraway, 1988). As such, their background, situation and identity are all recognised as impacting upon and influencing both the research process and results (Markula & Silk, 2011: 4). With qualitative studies observations are based on the relationship between the observer and the observed as opposed to being ‘wholly’ objective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005: 21). This dialogue is not merely a relationship of person to other, however, but it is also internal to the researcher as they make decisions about the research process and revise their work (Markula & Silk, 2011: 73).

As a self-identified ‘gamer’ who is an active participant in both playing games and certain subcultures of gaming, it is necessary for me to consider how my current and previous experiences impact this research. This requires incorporating a strong thread of self-reflexivity into the research process through ‘giv[ing] considerable
thought to [my] own experiences […] [and] ‘plac[ing]’ [myself] in relation to the issues [I] am researching’ (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993: 72). To achieve this, I utilise elements of Pirkko Markula and Michael Silk’s (2011) reformulation of Johnson et al.’s (2004) cultural studies approach to discourse analysis which emphasises the role of the self-reflexive researcher; notably, the examination of my dialogue between the games and myself (Markula & Silk, 2011: 125). Thus, this research’s five-stage approach which ensures reflexivity within the discourse analysis is outlined as follows (as adapted from ibid.):

1. Close reading of the game (a dialogue between myself and the game which will comprise the autoethnographic immersive research journal).
2. Narrative and mechanics (the structuring of the game).
3. Organisation of meaning (the ideological dimension of game elements).
4. Intertextuality of the game.
5. Relations between the game as text, its meanings and ideological dimensions, and cultural formations/power relations.

As can be seen in the approach proposed above, in embedding self-reflexivity as part of the methodology, this method adopts a reflexive approach as a modality of the research. Therefore, in practising the immersive method outlined in this chapter, I must firstly be open and reflexive about my reading and context in relation to the media in which I am embedded. Secondly, I must then critically reflect on the nature of that interaction. The way in which I did this is highlighted in relation to specific arguments made in the analysis chapters. However, I also give an example here of how, during the coding of one particular game and the practising of this reflexive process, two of the stages outlined above created a specific affective-ideological dialogue. I do not carry through the data presented here into the substantive chapters of this thesis as I chose other themes and issues to analyse there. Rather I am using this example to highlight something of how I undertook this reflexive process and my place within it.

I played a game called *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) as part of the data collection phase of this research. The game opens with Ethan, the player character, being tasked to take care of his eldest son at a mall. The child wanders off and the player must search for him as the mall becomes an increasingly more frantic and crowded space. Running onto the street, Ethan spots his son about to be hit by a car
and leaps to save him, but fails. The narrative skips forward six months. Ethan is depressed and traumatised. His wife has left him. His surviving son, who is sad and withdrawn, soon goes missing; apparently kidnapped by the antagonist – the Origami Killer. In stage one of the reflexive approach adopted by this research, I made note of various strong emotions I felt during the course of this harrowing game. Having been very upset at suffering a miscarriage during the first year of my Ph.D., I was particularly attuned to being affected by narratives involving the loss or suffering of children. I recorded these emotions as part of the research journal, taking care to reflect on the presence of my ‘self’ within my affective experiences of playing that game; how it influenced my relation to the characters and storyline; and how it had an impact on the choices I made within the narrative. As part of the third stage of this reflexive process, I considered the ways in which player involvement was structured in order to create various affective states within the player – how and when the player was given control over a character’s actions and how that action was reacted to (both by non-player characters [NPCs] and the progression of the narrative). For instance, *Heavy Rain* draws strongly on dominant discourses of parenthood – specifically fatherhood. Ethan, in many ways as a traumatised person (he has flashbacks and memory lapses) does not fulfil the notion of a ‘good’ parent. Indeed, he wonders throughout most of the game whether he himself is the Origami Killer. He is positioned as an impotent and weak father. His brutal, physical suffering – necessary to successfully rescue his son at the end of the game – are trials in order for his son to survive. His lost fatherly potency (signified by the loss of both his sons, his beautiful wife, and his impressive home) is reclaimed if the player is ‘successful’ during these trials, and he once again becomes the ‘good’ father (signified not only by his kidnapped son’s survival and eventual flourishing, but also through an attractive, younger girlfriend and a stylish new apartment). These two layers of reflexivity were co-constituted. I could only understand my affective responses and the data I produced by considering several layers of this reflexive process simultaneously. The loss of my pregnancy was not only painful for me in direct relation to Ethan’s loss of his sons, but also the discourses of ‘good’ parenting present in this game resonated with deep concerns about myself as a ‘bad’ miscarrying mother. The two layers of this reflexive approach thus impacted upon each other, and I could only understand my reading of the game through this layered reflexive process.
In employing elements of autoethnography and autobiography as part of the immersive method, I position myself as a subject of this research. My experiences therefore become ‘the epistemological and ontological nexus upon which the research process turns’ (Spry, 2001: 711, in Ettore, 2005: 544). As it interrogates the immersive, experiential, and affective elements of gaming, it is important to recognise that this method produces results which may be slightly different were another researcher undertaking the immersive process, or if performed by myself in a different time and place (Letherby, 2002: para. 3.10). Indeed, as I have shown above, had I played Heavy Rain prior to my miscarriage, my affective experience might have been similar, but not as intense. The processes of ‘reading’ and meaning-making from the games which are deployed in this method are a ‘contingent activity deeply rooted in [my] autobiograph[y] and the tools, means and knowledge they provide’ (Stanley, 1992: 84). It light of this, it is necessary that reflexivity is utilised as a key research tool as it enables me to discuss data produced as being my readings, and yet also allows for them to be located in a specific place and time. This places my research within a specific context and offers it to the reader as a discussion of the many and varied affective and immersive experiences of gaming. As a white, middle-class, British woman, my situation undeniably shapes the ways I make meaning whilst playing video games. As I detail at the close of this chapter, I chose to examine a spread of games with a range of protagonists – some of whom are ‘fixed’, whilst others allow for the player to select elements of their design. I did so in order to consider my affective and identificatory relationship to a range of protagonists, who may or may not have the same race, ethnicity, class-background, and personality as me. Moreover, as a lifelong gamer, I am already attuned to various debates and discussions within the community – from ‘in-jokes’ to the gamergate controversy – which may influence my ‘reading’ process.

In deploying a method which reflexively documents and examines my affective experiences of playing games, I am not merely restricted to researching myself. My self ‘encompasses second- and third-hand knowledges as well as first-hand knowledges’ (Stanley, 1993: 50). I am a socially-connected and situated agent. Whilst it is true that my ‘reading’ of the game cannot be said to be based on developer(s) intent, as ‘intentionality cannot be read from the text at all. […] What matters, and what is immediately accessibly, is the [game] itself’ (Stanley, 1992: 85). This immersive method (detailed in a later section) nevertheless allows me to access, via its combination with the method of qualitative content analysis, as well as the discussion
of the structuring and direction of player interaction, to what may be the ‘preferred playing’ within the range of possibilities for play. In deploying such analyses through using a mode of autoethnography, the results are highly intertextual. This means that as my experiences are made vis-à-vis my situation, background, experience as a gamer, and knowledge of certain gaming subcultures and communities, so too must my findings.

As this thesis utilises textual analysis informed by theories of agency, desire, ethics, and affect, it can make claims on knowledge by maintain strong objectivity and a constant reflexive dialogue integrated as part of the data collection process. This thesis views video games through multiple theoretical lenses in order to advance the study of the medium and to explore the potential relationship between immersive environments and affective responses. There are, of course, limitations with this thesis’ chosen methods which are common to much research which utilises textual analysis. Some researchers have criticised textual analysis, denouncing it as subjective and unscientific in its claims (see McKee, 1988). Nevertheless I believe that these methods are the most appropriate for answering the research questions set out in the introduction and for fulfilling the research objectives because they allow for the exploration of affective responses to elements of gameplay. This exploration, being based on existing theories which are employed in the analyses of other media, are a good starting point from which to develop an understanding of the affective experience of gaming as well as developing a research toolkit specifically for this interactive, immersive medium.

**Research Design**

Video games contain many elements which are relatable to, and overlap with, other disciplines; they are visual, audial, and structured in part around narrative, albeit in fragmentary form. Consequently, as I explored in chapter one, it would seem that theories which have been developed and refined within these different but relatable disciplines, such as literary studies, film studies, and sociology, can be applied to the study of video games, particularly when interrogating specific game elements. However, given the ‘gameness’ (Juul, 2001) of video games, many within the field of games studies have recognised that this approach alone is insufficient. The application of theories from other disciplines must be tempered with the recognition of video
games as a combination of *ludus* and *paidea*, and the rule-boundedness and freedom for playfulness which these respectively denote. Video games are a new medium distinct from film, hypertext, and literature due to the mechanics which structure the player’s interactive involvement whilst also allowing for, and encouraging, play. These elements are not discrete, but rather overlap with and impact upon each other co-constitutively to create a complete gaming experience. In so doing they become difficult to separate. Thus, in order to get critical purchase on the affective experience of immersive gaming, researchers studying video games need to take into account many different strands and structures of the game world and gaming process to build a complete picture. To that end, this research is required to interrogate many aspects of the game and the gaming experience; the mechanics (rules) which structure play, the visual, audial and temporal aspects, as well as the experiential, affective, and immersive elements.

In order to draw together the study of gaming’s media elements as well as its rule sets and mechanics, this thesis deploys two methods. Firstly, a mode of qualitative content analysis which engages with many aspects of the game space and experience is developed and utilised. Through extensive exploration of different game elements (detailed below) this method enables analysis of the structures – representative, technological and immersive – directing and constraining the player in order to parse the wider affective field of gaming. These different structures as apparent in various aspects of the gaming process are documented, coded, and organised.

The qualitative content analysis (hereafter QCA) is performed alongside the second method; immersive discourse multi-media analysis whereby I engage in the traditional modes of autoethnography and discourse analysis whilst also articulating an autobiographic, ‘self-reflexive’ dimension. The immersive dimension of this method is similar in some respects to the cultural immersion performed in participant observation autoethnography. However, here is it the structuring of game processes and interaction and how it interacts with and informs the experience of immersion in a virtual environment which is examined. Each chapter begins as a discussion of the relevant theory and progresses onto an analysis (based on the theoretical tools outlined and on findings from the QCA initially) of a specific way in which gameplay is structured. The immersive method is used to extend these discussions and offer up specific examples of how this structuring may create affective responses. Rather than choosing one game as an exemplar for each chapter’s discussion, a broad range of
examples from amongst the games played throughout the research process is drawn upon.

Method One: Qualitative Content Analysis

This phase of the research examines the in-game methods and means by which player responses are structured and enabled as they participate in activities within the rule-bound and interactive space of the gameworld. It involves performing qualitative content analysis on a slice of games selected in line with several criteria (outlined later in this chapter). This method allows data to be generated which maps generic elements common to the particular slice of games studied and thus it provides insight into how narrative and mechanic constraints function to structure immersive play, player involvement, and potentially, affective responses. Utilising a mode of QCA informed by both traditional theoretical media tools and principles developed in games studies (which highlight the gameness [Juul, 2001] and interactivity [Smethurst & Craps, 2015] of games), this method allows this thesis to locate and examine elements of complicity, transgression, resistance and so forth as they are enacted through both the representative, mechanical, and immersive. Furthermore this method, when extended by the second method, enables an analysis employing notions of affect and subjectivity in order to extend the discussion of game structures into the experiential.

Research Process

The mode of QCA practised in this stage of the research process is akin to the integrated textual analysis (ITA) developed by Michelle Kempson (2012) during her doctoral research into feminist zine culture. Kempson’s method, itself based on the work of other scholars, is built upon in this research and adapted in order to allow the analysis to cover all elements (representative, mechanical, interactive) of the multimodal medium that is gaming. Kempson developed ITA with reference to conventional QCA, semiotic analysis, and thematic analysis. Likewise, this thesis takes its analytic base from conventional QCA. This method of QCA is the most appropriate as it requires the researcher to be immersed in the data such that the categorisation and naming process can emerge inductively (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005: 1279; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009: 309). As such, it is especially useful and applicable
to a medium like video games where relatively little theory already exists on which to base a more deductive approach, and which necessarily requires a high level of interaction. Similar to Kempson’s ITA, this study integrates elements of semiotic and thematic analysis in order that the specific ‘units’ which are found via the QCA concerning the structuring of player action and interaction could be interrogated vis-à-vis notions of desire, affect, agency and subjectivity. Thus these units were systematically coded and described, with evidence given for each instance, whilst also being analysed in reference to the research questions set out in the introduction. Like Kempson’s work, these units were conceptually mapped such that they might be interrogated rather than merely presented (2012: 122).

It was necessary that the method of analysis employed in this thesis built on and adapted the method of ITA such that it is applicable to the study of gaming. In doing so it was important to recognise the contribution of the technology of gaming if its generic structures were to be understood (Bateman, 2008: 12). As any interaction with a game requires influencing it (Kücklich, 2002), therefore any discussion of a game’s meaning must necessarily be influenced by the context of the player (Malliet, 2007: para. 9). Thus, in practising this method there was firstly a need to play the game from multiple vantage points – Steven Malliet (2007) recommends that games scholars play as different ‘categories of gamer’, perhaps by using Richard Bartle’s (1996) categorisation of video game players into socialisers, killers, achievers, explorers. Secondly, it was necessary when undertaking this method that I maintain a good understanding of the metagame – Espen Aarseth (2003) recommends the secondary resources of the surrounding subculture of that game, which would include walkthroughs², message board discussions, industry and fan reviews, and ‘let’s play’ videos (6). This method of QCA combined these elements in order to achieve an understanding of each game beyond my own play style as both a gamer and a researcher. In order to structurally analyse the potential meaning-making processes in certain game elements, such as differing combat styles or achievement hunting³, it was necessary to repeatedly and ‘expertly’ play the game (Malliet, 2007: para. 11). This detailed analysis of mechanical elements through repetitive and thorough

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² A ‘walkthrough’ is a strategy guide that ‘walks’ the player through the game, usually giving details such as enemy tactics, solutions for puzzles, locations of collectibles and so forth.
³ Achievement hunting refers to a play style in which the player privileges unlocking achievements or trophies, increasing their Gamerscore (Microsoft) or Trophy levels (PlayStation).
consideration was achieved during this research through extensive play, and a portion of time was spent exploring the metagame for inspiration about how to approach the gameplay via different styles. This method enables this research to present a broad and yet detailed understanding of each analysed game.

The games were played to allow the categorisation and naming to emerge from all elements of play and experience. Therefore, I analysed text (both written, such as codex, clues, and notes, as well as dialogue), narrative, sound, visuals (world and character design), mechanics (including but not limited to enemy/companion/NPC AI, character building, skill trees, combat, movement, cover, physics, maps, goals), and interaction (interface, goals, and restrictions). As this method required categories to emerge during analysis, I allowed the development and highlighting of ‘units’ to occur organically throughout the research phase. Due to the wide range of elements of gaming and gameplay analysed in this research, the units varied widely in the initial stages of coding, ranging from specific mechanics and rewards, to narrative tropes and themes, to affective responses.

The six stages of this mode of the ITA process (as adapted from Kempson, 2012:125, and Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009: 310-312) undertaken as the first of this thesis’ research methods are as follows:

1. Select the data sample, which will be restricted due to specific criteria (as outlined later on in this chapter).
2. Refine the areas on which to focus vis-a-vis the research questions and the scope/size of the project. These units are then noted as the research progresses, building into the raw data.
3. Develop a list of secondary nodes by coding the primary data which is already organised into units.
4. Group the nodes into broader relevant categories in relation to the focus of the study.
5. Identify nodes which constitute the key themes of analysis.
6. Map out the conventions such that the findings and conclusions can be visualised.
This method for coding the data was integrated with the data collected from the second method. As such, I first outline the immersive method before going on to detail how this thesis’ coding process works specifically in relation to its collected data.

Method Two: The Immersive Method

The qualitative content analysis outlined above is extended by the second method; immersive autoethnography developed specifically for interrogating themes within interreactive and immersive media. As discussed in the previous chapter, there has been criticism of the theoretical handling of immersion within games studies. Jesper Juul (2005) argues that Murray’s (1997) definition of immersion as being transported to a virtual world is misleading when applied to the study of video games as players may be ‘absorbed by the game as a real-world activity’ (Juul, 2005: 190) and that it is a mistake to focus on storytelling when analysing games. There are also issues surrounding the epistemological understanding of immersion – Scott McCracken (1998) criticises any understanding of immersion which presents the player as passively consuming games (118). I addressed these issues theoretically in the previous chapter, but it is also necessary to address them methodologically before any study involving immersion can be undertaken. In order to do so, this thesis studies immersion via immersive discourse analysis. A method of ‘playing the game’ rather than merely observing allowed me to not only view gaming as a situated real-world activity, but, as this method is similar in some respects to autoethnography and memory work, I am also able to discuss the ‘imagining’ which Juul (2005) asserts is a necessary part of gaming and which takes place when one is immersed in interactive play. The immersive method allowed this thesis to address McCracken’s (1998) concern that a study into the immersive elements of gaming will set up the player as a passive consumer of games. Indeed, in its discussion of immersion and the structuring of affective gaming, this thesis views the player as an active participant, both in terms of physical interaction and imaginative projection.

Drawing on chapter one’s discussion of affect and Wetherell’s (2012) concept of affective practice, this method seeks to empirically examine affective responses to gameplay. Affect needs to be located ‘not in the ether, or in endless and mysterious circulations, but in actual bodies and social actors, negotiating, making decisions, evaluating, communicating, inferring and relating’ (Wetherell, 2012: 159). As this is
single-player, off-line gaming, the actors in this research are myself, the game’s interface, and the game text. The interreactivity of video games, I show in this thesis’ substantive discussion, becomes part of the circuit of affect; responding to my affective and embodied reactions and, in some ways, affirms and reinforces them by providing feedback. Whilst it is difficult to do so, other research has successfully attained critical purchase on the embodied and relational components of affect, such as Cath Lambert’s (2016) project exploring visitor’s affective responses to live art. Recognising the ‘conundrum’ (2) facing researchers of affect, Lambert’s research draws on a range of mixed methods – some established, some experimental. The live art (research) hub situated alongside the art installation became a ‘space of affect’ from which multiple threads of data – discursive, embodied, and visual – were drawn (Lambert, 2013).

Whilst the immersive method developed here is predominantly discursively documented, the several stage process (outlined on page 88) incorporates the autonomic, embodied, and affective within the data by having a multistage process of intense (physical and psychic) engagement, interspersed with documented moments of commentary and/or reflection, followed by a more intense process of reflexive contemplation after the conclusion of play sessions.

This method therefore employed immersive discourse analysis which was informed by traditional multi-media discourse analysis and critical theory, whilst also highlighting a self-reflexive, autoethnographic, and affective dimension. The structuring of the game as an immersive environment was analysed through experiences of play, which necessarily included interaction with the virtual environment and game processes. The analyses of the chosen games was informed by the QCA outlined previously. This allowed for the two methods to be practised in parallel, informing and reforming each other. Ultimately, they became co-constitutive in that interesting lines of inquiry which were revealed via one method necessarily impacted on the direction and ‘units’ analysed via the other method.

This mode of immersive analysis whereby I research the game through play is, I believe, both valid and necessary due firstly to the interactive nature of video games, which, as was outlined in chapter one, renders a reading of the visual aspects without the gameplay aspects problematic. Also, it utilises my position as an ‘insider’. This perspective is not only deemed essential by the gaming community for understanding video games, but is also a useful direct insight into the experience of gaming. Moreover, in order to analyse difficulty levels, or in order to be able to play the narrative through
to completion, I must have certain skills and familiarity with a game’s controls and the hardware’s interface. In addition, this method of research bridges the narratology-ludology divide in the game studies community as it positions me in such a way that I am able to analyse and discuss not only the media elements of the game, but also the game mechanics and immersive elements that can only be revealed through gameplay. It might be possible to discuss some of a video game’s mechanics, such as character creation and menus without hands-on experience of the game (with the researcher observing a play session). But for more complex understanding of the gameworld, such as bugs, team and character building, interface and so forth, then the researcher needs to experience the game first hand. The result of deploying this method is that it enables me to get critical purchase on elements of the affective experience of gaming which are often effaced as part of the research process. Just as an autoethnographer immerses themselves in the culture they are studying, and considers and comments upon that process, so too should the media theorist reflect critically on their immersion in the virtual world of their chosen texts.

Why Practice an Immersive Method? 1. Texts are Immersive

In arguing for the immersive method developed and deployed as part of this thesis’ research methods, I build upon the rationale for utilising the aforementioned method of autoethnography. Using an immersive, participatory method when studying video games enables me to get purchase on how modes of engagement and structures of the gameworld can potentially have an effect on the meaning-making process. Moreover, as has already been discussed, video games require direct interaction in order to function; the researcher who plays games will necessarily develop the knowledge and skill required to navigate and ‘beat’ the game. Thinking back to the three stages of immersion discussed in the previous chapter, the researcher who does so will therefore begin to develop the first level of immersion. Of course, whilst playing the game they may also reach other higher levels of immersion due to the length of time they will be required to spend playing in order to complete the game. They are also likely to begin experiencing some affects as they play (such as tension when they begin a difficult battle and elation when they succeed). Recognising the specific emotions and attachments that engagement produces allows researchers to examine a key component of gaming. For the purpose of this research, I develop this method with video games
in mind and have used a definition of immersion based on engagement with new media technologies. However, I believe it could be adapted to any medium which necessarily involves some level of active involvement and attachment from the researcher.

2. Modes of Engagement Alter Investment in a Text’s Ideology

The act of playing a game is where the rules embedded into the game’s structure start operating, and its program code starts having an effect on cultural and social, as well as artistic and commercial realities.

(Ermi & Mäyrä, 2005: 15-16)

The immersive method builds upon reader response theory in that it recognises that the meaning is not projected onto the user by the text; rather the user negotiates multiple meanings with and through the text. The user’s attachment to the text may interact with these meanings. Therefore, as immersive media necessitate a level of attachment, an immersive method of analysis allows me to speculate on how a player’s level of engagement may affect their understanding of, or investment in, the textual structures, themes and tropes specific to that text. Even though I do not position immersion as antithetical to critical engagement (as I argued in the previous chapter), I nevertheless acknowledge that different modes of engagement may alter meaning-making. Josephine Machon (2013) asserts that within immersive theatres, ‘audience-participants [are] complicit with the concept, content and form’ (279) and that immersive experiences lead to a more lasting encounter with the work’s themes (120). Therefore, an immersive method firstly gives insight into how the AAA games studied here are composed in order to structure engagement. This is achieved through reflecting on gameplay experiences and reflexively analysing my own responses to specific elements of play. For instance, I can ask such questions as: at which point did I achieve a sense of total immersion; what helped me achieve it; how did it feel before, during and after, and what did it do to my understanding of that part of the game? Or – when encountering a specific element of the game – I could consider how it feels be complicit within a particular ideological framework or bound by a set of restrictive rules which governs my behaviour. In doing so, this method allows me to reflect upon the intersection of game structures, immersive play, and ideology, whilst also reflexively acknowledging my own emotions and position within the research. As
‘audience-immersants are encouraged to attend to the situations, narratives, and ideas within the world, and by extension to relate these to the equivalent in the wider “real” world’ (Machon, 2013, 279) then performing an immersive method may also enable me to know about the larger political, epistemic or cultural moment by immersively engaging with a text.

3. Adding a Further Dimension to Research

The immersive method is a form of autoethnography which specifically enables the researcher to consider their relationship to interactive media and question the impact upon meaning-making when they emotionally invest in the media they research. As such, this method enables me to utilise my experiences of immersively and intensively playing and researching to give a further dimension to this project. When practised alongside other methods, such as traditional media theory or qualitative content analysis, the immersive method enables me to situate my analyses of the games alongside my own involvement. Whilst it could be possible to practise an immersive methodology without the autoethnographic component (in terms of intensively playing the games), it is the combination of intensive engagement with the interactive media whilst reflecting on my play experiences and affective responses which enable this developed method to extend its discussions and claims into an interactionist, experiential sphere and consider questions around affect, desire, motivation, and agency. Furthermore, this method allows me to both test and comment on the appropriateness of the utilisation (or adaptation) of existing theories in the analysis of video games which, as I laid out in the first chapter, is a widely debated issue within the field.

Data Collection

In undertaking this immersive participatory method it was necessary to consider the multiple modes of engagement, interaction, and involvement with the game. This required that I first reflect and consider how I interact with the games that I play, and then build on that as necessary. I am usually what would be called a ‘completionist gamer’ in that I feel compelled to collect every item and achievement; discover every secret; explore every location. This lends itself well to practising the QCA as it means
that exploring maps, mechanics, and storylines down to the smallest detail is already my *modus operandi*. In order to experience many different kinds of relationship to the game, I was required to practise different types of engagement and play. This enabled me to get critical purchase on how the player’s relationship to the game may correspond to how they make and interpret meaning from and through it. Thus in my journal entries, it was necessary to be reflexive about how I engaged with each game, considering the affective, embodied, and psychic dimensions to the experience of gameplay, and my responses to discrete game elements.

As Julian Kücklich (2002) recognises, any interaction with a game involves influencing it. That is, as discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, although games are rule-bound spaces, they necessarily also involve *paidea*. This playful interaction with the game requires a level of agency in which the individuality of the player then has an impact (to some extent) on the direction and form of interaction. The context of the player therefore has to be taken into account when discussing games, gaming, and meaning (Malliet, 2007: para. 9). In order to negotiate this tension within a research method which examines games, the researcher is required to play the game from multiple vantage points. Aarseth (2003) suggests that the researcher must repeatedly and ‘expertly’ play the game (6). This requires that the researcher develop significant and specific skills with the particular game genres and controls investigated. As this research seeks to analyse the meaning-making and affective potential of game structures, these considerations were incorporated into the method through practising diverse combat styles (testing all available forms and styles within each game) and play styles (such as achievement-hunting or no-kill playthroughs\(^4\)).

As previously mentioned, Aarseth (2003) recommends that game researchers utilise and draw upon the subculture surrounding the game(s) studied; that which is termed the ‘metagame’. It was beneficial to myself as a researcher studying video games to gain an understanding of the metagame in order to gain insight into how other players interact with the game and reveal game elements which I may have missed. Such secondary resources included reviews by critics and fans, ‘let’s play’ videos, walkthroughs, fan sites and message board discussions.

\(^4\) A ‘playthrough’ refers to the playing of a game in its entirety – from start to finish. It can also refer to videos made for streaming services such as Twitch and YouTube in which players record or stream their playing through a game. In this thesis, I use the term in reference to the former meaning.
In light of these issues, therefore, these methods sought to analyse the chosen games’ mechanical, narrative, and affective structures through thorough, deep, and repetitive playing of each game using various styles of play, as well as exploring possibilities for alternative styles of play through accessing the metagame. More specifically, as part of the immersive method, data was generated through keeping a journal in which I documented my critical reflections on my close relationship to the object of study. Through undertaking methods which required me to practise several modes of play and relationships to the game, the immersive method thus enabled critical insight into the experiential aspects of gaming through documenting personal engagement with, and affective responses to, game structures. These two method thus complimented each other as they could be practised in tandem and gave epistemological access to two elements of the game and gaming process (both the means by which players are directed and constrained, and the potential affective, experiential, embodied, or emotional responses to these structures).

To practise this method, I kept a research journal which documented the experience of gaming as I played; particularly making note of the immersive, embodied, and affective dimensions. I piloted the research process first with a short game which would not be part of the research data – this was to ensure that I ironed out the issues with this method before embedding and immersing myself within the games on which I would be collecting data. My data collection in this pilot followed closely autoethnographic data collection as it is widely practised. That is, I kept a written journal and documented my experiences and thoughts as I played the game. In so doing, I discovered that my level of immersion and the flow of gameplay were hindered when I had to pause the game in order to write a journal entry. This meant that when I restarted gameplay, my level of immersion had dropped. Writing in the journal ‘pulled’ me out of immersion and therefore had a negative impact upon my data collection, as it would sometimes take me several minutes to regain a sense of immersion, flow, and my previous affective state. If something noteworthy happened within this period, I would be less able to discuss the immersive and affective experience of it as I was not in the right ‘headspace’. Realising this was an issue, I switched halfway through the pilot to an iPad application with which I could record my journal entries. This was an improvement not only because recording a journal audially took a fraction of the time compared to writing it longhand. Also, because I could keep my focus on the screen whilst documenting I was less likely to be ‘pulled
out’ of my immersive state to the same degree. Sometimes, if I felt I needed to make the entry whilst it was as ‘fresh’ as possible and I was still ‘in the moment’, these journal entries were recorded during play. However, mostly I recorded them whilst in the menu screen or during the frequent and lengthy loading screens – both were a common feature of the games played. Consequentially, the process of data collection for this method was as follows:

1. Play the game immersively, intensively, and repetitively.
   a. Both allow, and actively seek, to become emotionally invested in gameplay and narrative content.
2. Record audio diaries (either whilst playing or during loading screens – whatever feels most natural and comfortable).
   a. Note bodily responses (i.e. sweating, elevated heart rate, muscle tension, stomach lurching, nausea, headaches, tremors, stiffness, pain, gestures, etc.).
   b. Note emotional and affective responses (elation, joy, pride, achievement, desire, arousal, numbness, discomfort, indignation, disbelief, sadness, depression, grief, fear, anger, etc.).
   c. Consider moments where immersion is interrupted.
   d. Consider moments of discomfort or cognitive dissonance.
   e. If possible at this stage, make links between these responses and specific gameplay and narrative content.
   f. If possible at this stage, reflexively make links between these responses and past experiences, memories, or personal background.
3. Later that day, return to the audio diaries and reflect on:
   a. That day’s experience of gameplay (both as a whole and as individual moments).
   b. The embodied and affective responses.
   c. The intensity and diffusion of those responses.
   d. Links between those responses and various elements of gameplay.
   e. The ideological resonances and implications of those elements of gameplay.
   f. Reflexively make stronger links between these responses and past experiences, memories, or personal background.
g. What cultural commonsenses and preferred knowledges have been drawn on? Reflexively consider how the gaps in between narrative, gameplay, semiotic, ideological, and epistemic fragments have been ‘filled in’.

This several-stage process was developed in order to critically engage with the several stages of immersion (as identified by Emily Brown and Paul Cairns [2004] and discussed in the previous chapter). Reflecting during appropriate moments of gameplay (such as during loading screens) as well as later each day not only allows this process to have as little impact upon play as possible, but also enables a multi-stage reflexive process by incorporating several temporal moments of reflection. In following this data collection sequence, the immersive method is able to critically access the immersive, affective, and embodied responses to various gameplay elements whilst also maintaining a reflexive awareness of the researcher’s position within the creation of knowledge.

Which Games?

If one were to attempt to parse the entire field of video games without restriction it would be much the same as if one were to attempt to parse the field of film – much too broad a scope for one chapter in a thesis. Therefore, the area of video games which I explore in this project requires definition. Before outlining the chosen titles, I briefly explore the notion of genre both within games studies and without, in order to set up my delimiting of the games. Wai Chee Dimock (2011) highlights the issues inherent in creating selection criteria for genre analysis:

To do justice to the phenomenon of genre, what kinds of archives would be necessary? How many languages should we consult and hold ourselves accountable for? And what is the scale of that undertaking—across what length of time and what width of space should we gather out material, requiring what account of their kinship, their flirtations and dispersals?

(Dimock, 2011: para. 96)
Clearly, the demarcation of generic boundaries within this study presents certain problems. Ludwig Wittgenstein (1967) understood textual genres as being a ‘family resemblance’ of overlapping similarities between text (both within and across media). He formulates genre as an elastic concept due to the recognition that ‘resemblance’ can imply similarities on some but not all elements. Therefore this formulation of genre necessarily allows for a degree of flexibility due to recognising subtle differences between texts within the same ‘family’ (32, in Lomborg, 2014: 16). Since Carolyn Miller’s (1984) article ‘Genre as Social Action’ the study of genre has taken a turn from ‘text to context’ (Bhatia, 2010: 166) with some researchers focusing instead upon the social communicative role of genres. Miller (1984) argued that genres are social action through which we determine the reoccurrence of similar elements in a situation (156). Those who have developed Miller’s argument see genre as ‘orienting devices’ which can be utilised in order to help communicating parties (Lomborg, 2011: 58). As dynamic social processes both within and outside of the text, then, these orienting devices cannot be clearly defined (ibid.: 64) and as such any understanding of genre needs to appreciate the fluidity of genres as opposed to utilising them as static classifying system (Warhol, 2011: para. 20). Thus, there are issues with performing genre studies based on static classification of textual elements as this ‘constrains the analytic gaze’ (Lomborg, 2011: 62) by not recognising the genre as dynamic, and therefore, open to adaptation. Moreover, as a genre’s function determines its characteristics – its structure, contents, lexis and grammar (Bax, 2011: 51) – it is therefore necessary to define the functional nature of genres in one’s analysis.

*Genre in Games Studies*

When genre has been employed by researchers of video games, it has usually been informed by traditional media theories. For example, in her study of the Mario games, Sharon R. Sherman (1997) mobilises the concept of genre in order to study the social role of gender in games. She does this by analysing the characterisation of Mario (of *Super Mario Bros*) as a hero archetype and ritual figure through the lens of Jung’s hero journal:
In the intertextual dimension of myth, Märches, and video games, the narrative serves at its core. The games reinforce gender roles and blur genre distinctions as the players transit through their adolescent worlds.

(Sherman, 1997: 265)

Sharon’s approach raises discussion points regarding the influence of the myth genre on video game narrative. Likewise Diane Carr (2003) in her essay ‘Play Dead: Genre and Affect in Silent Hill and Planescape Torment’ also seeks to understand the generic structures inherent in video games through critically interrogating gameplay elements. Following on from the previous discussion of genre as a cognitive tool which individuals can utilise in order to make sense of their communicative processes (Lomborg, 2014: 16), then it is clear that as a pragmatic analytical tool, this understanding of genre could provide a novel means to study games and gaming.

Other studies of video games and genre have employed the method of content analysis in order to quantify elements of the game world (Brand et al., 2003), levels of violence (Smith et al., 2010), violence and gender roles (Dietz, 1998), and the portrayal of avatars (Hitchens, 2011). Such studies have not fully integrated the discussions surrounding the need to highlight simulation and interaction which has been proposed by games studies researchers in their empirical analyses (such as Juul [2005] as discussed in chapter one). Instead, they focus predominantly on the representational aspects of the game.

What does this formulation of genre as social action necessitate in terms of this thesis’ chosen methods? Following Lomborg’s (2011) arguments, this analysis revolves predominantly around textual analytic methods but also develops the methods along an interactionist, experiential framework (68-69). The latter was achieved through both immersing myself within the process of gaming as part of the research method (especially in method two’s mode of immersive autoethnography). Simultaneously, I highlight the generic conventions within the game as being socially communicative through reference to social interactionism – achieved by drawing in questions of affect, desire, and player subject positions. Moreover, as digital genres act through their interactivity (as both medium and text) it is important when one is analysing multimodal documents that the methods chosen must demonstrate an understanding of the specific characteristics of the medium in question in order that genre be fully understood (Askehave & Neilson, 2005: 121). Therefore, as I have
already outlined, the QCA deployed in this research was partly comprised of the interactive elements of gaming.

An issue faced when developing a research process for the study of video games is that games by their nature require interaction. There is no game without the gamer. Whether it is the researcher or research participants who are the player(s), they are nevertheless required to possess some skills with the game(s) they are required to play. Playing games to competency and/or completion takes considerable time and effort. Many AAA games require an investment of tens if not hundreds of hours in total, and even then the player may not have experienced all that game had to offer. Moreover, skills honed in one game may not necessarily translate into ease and success in a different game, particularly when moving between genres or systems where fine motor controls, generic expectations and knowledge, and the player interface may be unfamiliar. When considering the selection of game titles, therefore, it was important that the games and game genres selected for this project were ones in which I already possessed some measure of skill, both in terms of the hardware they run on and the in-game controls. This is a requirement when practising the immersive method previously outlined because, as discussed in chapter two, a measure of skill and comfort with the game genre and controls is required for the first level of immersion to be achieved. If I had chosen a genre with which I was unfamiliar (such as a sports game or racing game) I would have to expend an unreasonable amount of time developing the specific gamer habitus required for that game before I could even begin to collect data. This would have been unfeasible due to the time restrictions of this thesis’ fieldwork. Thus, as my specific gaming skills are restricted to console gaming, and game genres such as shooters and RPGs\(^5\), I was therefore required to restrict the list of titles accordingly.

The area of gaming with which this research is concerned is so-called AAA or ‘blockbuster’ titles which have been produced for adults (that is, they have been developed with significant resources such as funding and advertising, and they are a 15 rating or over). This is because many of the titles which are billed as affective, emotional, or immersive (usually with a larger focus on narrative, world creation and exploration) are produced for adults. Moreover, the effect of gameplay on children and

\(^5\) As has already been mentioned in previous chapters, an RPG (role-playing game) belongs to a genre which emphasises immersive and complex narratives, player choice, statistical and varied character development and levelling, and inventory management.
analyses of games produced specifically for children are specific lines of inquiry and are not the focus of this thesis’ interrogation.

The titles selected were developed in Western Europe or North America. This decision was taken because there are wide cultural and mechanical differences between games produced, for example, for the Western or Japanese market. Moreover, the titles selected are the original intellectual property of the developers. That is, they are not adaptations of comic books, films, or novels. Although it is undoubtedly necessary to highlight the intertextuality of video games, it is more straightforward to do so when the game has not been adapted from a previous media. The games chosen are generally both widely played (I used statistics on Xbox Live, the PlayStation Network, and Amazon to discover which titles were the most popular) and well received by critics and players alike (I used various sources which give aggregate scores such as Metacritic, Game rankings, and IGN). This is because games which are both more widely distributed and well received are more likely to provoke more online discussion and have a greater fan base, leading to a larger amount of information as part of their ‘metagame’ which I could use to inform my playstyles and exploration. Moreover a game often gets a good rating when players have been moved, affected, or immersed to a higher degree (among other criteria). As this thesis looks at games as games and as a means of communicating information, narrative, and fantasy, it is imperative that the games chosen have ‘sucked people in’. Through examining reviews from players and critics I was also able to select games which had been billed and discussed as being as emotional, affective, or immersive.

The games chosen were restricted to single-player games or had single player campaigns and only included co-operative (‘co-op’) multiplayer play as an unrelated addition to the main storyline. This is because to study both multi- and single-player gameplay introduced too many variables to the study (for example, different mechanics or goals), as well as the need to theorise the social interaction which is a main feature of multiplayer and cooperative play. Moreover, in broad terms, multiplayer gameplay often has a different focus – namely, winning the competition or cooperative teamwork – whereas single-player involves other elements (i.e. interaction with non-player characters, moral alignment, world exploration, NPC romance, and so on). As co-op play relies less on storylines and restrictive narrative progression, it therefore would not fit with the specific research questions and aims of this project. Thus, only single player games were included in the list of titles.
The games chosen did not include casual games. Like co-op play, a study of casual games would not fulfil the particular aims of this research. While casual games can be analytically rich and narratively ‘deep’, I sought games with elements often common to AAA titles, strong narrative focus, complex mechanics, lengthy, violence, and space for ethical play. I therefore selected what Andrew MacTavish (2002) terms ‘high-tech’ games: ‘the thrill of playing a fast-paced, high-tech game like *Quake III* is too dissimilar from the pleasures of *Tetris* to be included under a single category in which performative agency and technological effect are central to the gaming experience’ (34).

In selecting the chosen games along these lines, the list of games was narrowed down to 13 titles (including one trilogy) which had been released in the five years leading up to this research’s fieldwork, ranging from first-6 and third-person shooters7 (FPS and TPS) to RPGs, and linear narratives to sandboxes8: *Dishonored* (Arcane Studios, 2012); *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011); *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009); *Halo: Reach* (Bungie, 2010); *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013); *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal, 2011); *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2012); *Fable III* (Lionhead Studios, 2010); *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013); *Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception* (2011); *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010); *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013); and the *Mass Effect* trilogy (BioWare, 2007-2012). These games were chosen in part due to their strong focus on narrative. However, there are arguably no ‘best fit’ games to use when studying narrative as often those games which have a very high level of narrative might sacrifice essential elements of gameplay, such as the interactive drama *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) where interaction is limited to quick-time events9. The titles were also selected because they represent both a mixture of pre-established genres (horror, sci-

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6 As mentioned in chapter one, a ‘first-person shooter’ (FPS) is a game where the player occupies a first-person perspective (that is, they experience the action through the eyes of the player character) and in which the primary mechanic is based on combat using projectile weapons such as guns or bows.

7 ‘Third-person shooters’ (TPS) are similar to FPSs, except the player views the action from a third-person perspective relative to the player character. The camera usually occupies an over-the-shoulder perspective and is controllable within a limited range of movement (mostly rotating around the player character’s body).

8 A ‘sandbox’ is an open-ended game in which minimal restrictions are placed on the player. Usually there is a large amount of exploration and self-direction (as opposed to a linear narrative structure).

9 A ‘quick-time event’ (QTE) is a game mechanic whereby on-screen instructions prompt the player to perform a particular corresponding interaction with the interface in order for particular in-game events to successfully take place. A delay or incorrect interaction following the prompt often results in the failure of the intended action.
The Immersive Method

I, fantasy, heist, dystopian, post-apocalyptic, thriller, and adventure) and utilise a range of game mechanics (including FPS, TPS, melee, RPG, sandbox, driving, quick-time events and stealth) which fit the above rubric. These games were played from various viewpoints (involving repetition, discovering multiple narrative pathways, combat styles, difficulties, and ‘morailties’, as well as having an awareness of the larger ‘metagame’) in order that the generic mechanical, narrative, and interactive elements which structure player involvement and response could be highlighted and discussed.

Data Analysis

After collecting all the data, the written notes from the QCA and the recorded journal entries for the immersive method were then transcribed over two months. Usually, the QCA created initial units (as it was coded first), and these units were then extended and refined by the coding of the immersive research journal. However, some unanticipated units were ‘discovered’ whilst coding the immersive research journal, and I would then return to the previously coded data from the QCA with a new perspective.

I worked initially by coding the initial units of data by hand into primary nodes of analysis through making notes on the printed transcriptions. After roughly one third had been coded this way and the majority of the secondary nodes had emerged, these data were then imported as sources into Nvivo 11. I then electronically coded the remaining data. I did not run the data through the coding software, as I felt it was not nuanced enough to handle the discursive and affective elements of the initial units or the coding process. Throughout the analysis, it became evident that the ways in which the player is rewarded by the game was an important node, as it was referred to in many different units, and was itself connected to many other nodes (such as affective response, narrative impetus for action, and as a justification for violence). As such, I made the decision to bring in another layer of data into the coding process specific to this area of examination – the achievements and trophies for each game played.

10 ‘Melee’ refers to a close-quarters combat and can be the primary form of combat in a game or an option in a shooter.
11 ‘Stealth’ describes a mechanic or game genre in which the player utilises stealth (by avoidance or distracting) to overcome enemies or avoid them altogether. It can be a mechanic used alongside other combat mechanics to give the player options, or can exist as a genre in its own right.
Importing them into Nvivo, I then coded these data along the lines of the units already created during the initial analysis. Once all the sources and initial units had been coded, the secondary nodes were then mapped out, producing broader categories and links between nodes.

In the next stage of the analysis process, I printed and arranged the secondary nodes (both broad and narrow) by hand in order to visualise the data and begin to draw out the key lines of analysis. I then mapped by hand on a (very large) piece of paper the complex web of secondary nodes and broader, overarching categories (fig. 3.1 on the following page). Data from the immersive research journal, the QCA and the achievements/trophies were mapped together. The colours on figure 3.1 represent the mixture of focus on the mechanics, the player (and the affective-immersive experience of play), and the representational aspects of the game. As this mapping of the secondary nodes and broader categories is very large, when scaled down sufficiently to be inserted into this thesis as an image, it is too small to read. Therefore, I give a (very brief) example of how the different layers of coding worked here. Many of the secondary nodes are interconnected, making a ‘whole’ set of nodes and their connections impossible to show here in simplified form. As such I have selected a ‘slice’ of data to present; trimming off some of the more loosely connected nodes, and thus unfortunately losing some of the nuance from the examples (see fig. 3.2 on page 98). The text overlaid within the dotted text boxes represents data collected as part of the immersive research journal, which clearly adds an emotional/experiential dimension to the analysis. The data presented here – grouped into the category ‘trauma and vulnerability’ – informs some of the discussion in the following chapter.

As the QCA was inductive and allowed ‘units’ to be formed during the process of data collection, this research ended up mapping many elements of gameplay and games which the limited scope of this thesis is not able to discuss. Nevertheless, the lines of inquiry followed in the substantive chapters are those which were not only the most theoretically rich aspects of the data and discussion produced by this research. They also drew in elements from both the QCA and the immersive method, and engaged with the mechanical, representational and affective elements of gameplay.
Figure 3.1
Mapping units and performing analysis by hand
Figure 3.2
Mapping a slice of the analysis – trauma and vulnerability
Considerations

As this thesis’ discussion is based on textual analysis (within which is a discussion of the semiotic and experiential), it seeks to explore the possibility of means to access knowledge. The aim of this research is to further the understanding of the medium of video games through an exploration of the relationship between their immersive and affective structures, specifically interrogating themes of identification, motivation, and the positioning of the player-subject. This exploration consists in giving insight into the possible readings of the games’ structures. It attempts to utilise adapted theoretical tools from the study of other media and question whether they can further our understanding of not only video games’ visual and textual elements, but also the game’s mechanical elements. In his introductory text to semiotics, Jonathan Bignell (2002) outlines his approach to meanings in media:

First, the patterns and structures of signs in media texts conditions the meanings which can be communicated and understood. Second, the signs in media texts are understood in relation to other signs and other texts in a social and cultural context. Third, each medium has features specific to it and features which are shared with other media. Fourth, texts and media position their audiences in particular ways, and audiences understand and enjoy the media in different and diverse ways. Fifth, studying the negotiation of meanings between media and audiences is important in understating the ways that we think about ourselves and our culture.

This thesis takes a similar approach to the one laid out by Bignell; it views the three chapter-specific discussions not only in relation to the specific theoretical framework which is employed in each particular chapter, but also situates them relationally within the wider context of gaming. In so doing this thesis avoids viewing the games and the research data in a vacuum. It strengthens the validity of its conclusions by highlighting the situatedness and wider applicability of its analyses.

If in utilising the immersive research journal, which is both exploratory and experiential, conclusions were drawn directly from this method alone, then those conclusions would be drawn from the personal, to the political, to the public. To overcome this limitation and situate data drawn from the immersive research journal,
this method is used to primarily extend discussions arising from the QCA, drawing them into an interactionist and experiential framework.

**Ethical Considerations**

As the British Sociological Association guidelines on ethics (2002) are quite general and relate to professional standards, they were not written with research like this in mind. As such, the ethics of this research needs to be considered from other perspectives. Much of what has been written concerning feminist research ethics is primarily concerned with the care and privacy of participants, ‘virtues’ of research, and the questions surrounding the role of the researcher and their subjective ‘readings’ already outlined in this chapter (i.e. Preissle, 2007). Because this work is comprised of qualitative content and textual analysis, the several and varied issues which arise from research involving actual participants was avoided. As this is a media with which I am already engaged with, and a subculture in which I actively participate, the main ethical issue with this research is therefore my ‘closeness’ to the object of study. The myriad debates and issues surrounding notions of objectivity, subjectivity and reflexivity discussed in this chapter are relevant here. It is clear that, whilst my position as a gamer allows me to draw upon my experiences in order to access certain knowledges, I am nevertheless still required to strive to acknowledge the subjectivity of my experiences and highlight my bias as far as is possible. I do so by recognising my own limitations and prejudice as a researcher and ensuring that I always acknowledge my position in each given reading. I follow the reflexive plan outlined in the previous section, thus recognising my position and the resultant world-view that might influence my readings of the game’s text, representations and mechanics.

**Mental and Physical Wellbeing and the Immersive Method**

An ethical concern raised by my peers during the upgrade process of this thesis concerns the researcher’s duty of care of their self when undertaking intensive, immersive research. This is especially relevant when the research object contains potentially distressing or intense material. In this section I outline some of the particular difficulties I faced physically and emotionally when undertaking this
research. This question of mental wellbeing and immersive research is discussed in greater depth in the conclusion to this thesis.

Practising an immersive method requires not only rigorous self-reflection, but also many hours of playing games. Both of which have the potential to have an effect on the researcher’s mental (and physical) wellbeing. It has been noted by other scholars who employ autoethnography as a component of their data collection that, when this method is undertaken immersively (whether that is within a culture or otherwise), then the intensity of the research process and the constant self-reflection can induce states of anxiety (see, for example, Wall, 2008). The data collection for this thesis took six months of intensive playing (usually between six and ten hours a day), undertaken between April and September 2014. Unsurprisingly, I found I was physically affected by the sedentary nature of playing games for such long periods of time. Moreover, as achieving an immersive state when playing these games required blocking external stimuli, I found I produced the most insightful data when playing in near darkness. Finally, as a main focus of this research is on the ethical field of violent gaming, I thus chose to engage with games which I would not necessary have chosen to play for my own enjoyment because I found them to be overly frightening or distressing. All these elements predictably combined and resulted in my mood changing during my time in the field. Nevertheless, the data produced from the immersive method was thought-provoking. Should another researcher choose to undertake a similar method, I would advise them to spread out their data collection over a greater length of time where possible, routinely exercise, go outside, and ensure they put aside time each day in which they gently ‘disengage’ from their research before re-entering their home life.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the methodological basis for this thesis’ chosen research methods, before mapping out the process and design of those methods. Building on discussions of autoethnography and autobiography, and tracing issues of subjectivity and reflexivity, this chapter has developed and outlined an immersive participatory mode of autoethnography suited to getting critical purchase on the experiential and affective elements of immersive interactive media. This method could be extended by using a camera to document the research process, directed at the researcher, and capturing not only their journal entries (replacing the need for an audio recorder and
thus totally freeing up the researcher’s hands), but also their facial expressions and reaction to gameplay moment-by-moment. This would be akin to the ‘let’s play’ series of videos which are popular with both players and non-players on YouTube.
You are Commander Shepard, hero of the Citadel, conqueror of the Collectors, saviour of the galaxy.

(Mass Effect 3, BioWare, 2012)

When the soldier shot at Joel, I gasped. Realising that it had been Sarah who was caught horrified me. Joel's reaction was so moving. The worst thing was the noise Sarah made as he tried to move her. I was actually crying from the upsetting nature of the scene. Not ten minutes in, and I already feel emotionally drained by this game. That was it; from that point on I had been drawn in to such an extent that there was no going back, no stopping play. I had to complete the story.

(Immersive Research Journal: The Last of Us)

An unknown assailant is attacking. Fires have broken out. Now and then you may have to engage pockets of enemies, but the ringleaders are always unreachable or unknown – they are ‘out there’, somewhere else. You see scenes of devastation. In the distance, people gunned down from behind reinforced glass, gored and mauled, blood splattering and bodies twisting as they die before your eyes. Screams and cries ring in your ears but you are powerless to help. You can only push forward, learning each control in turn as you go. All that awaits you at the end is tragedy: death, kidnapping, or injury.

So begins several of the AAA titles which were analysed over the course of this research. Threat of attack, failure, kidnapping, death, injury, and confusion accompany the spectacle of violence, destruction, and chaos forming the first thirty minutes to an hour of gameplay. This chapter considers these traumatic prologues as well as the broader use of violent spectacle in video games. Utilising understandings of vicarious trauma, the genre of melodrama, and the spectacles of violence and technology, this early vulnerability and victimisation of the player character is explored in order to question how it operates to attach, affect, and direct the player. To do so, the modes
of player investment in the player character are discussed by briefly revisiting and extending the literature from chapter two. I argue that this investment is generated, in part, by melodramatic and violent spectacle enacted upon the player character. It acts, not only as an enabling fiction legitimating the use of ‘righteous’ violence, but also helps to create immersive identification in the player character. I propose that traumatic, violent and spectacular devices can provoke (and in some cases, demand) an ethical response. Through mobilising an understanding of the postmodern, technological sublime, this chapter argues that the power to sublimate is both offered by the game and is a central pleasure of play. At the conclusion to this chapter’s discussion, I consider the gendered, raced, and classed resonances attached to this process. I argue that the ability to sublimate elements of the game world, when coupled with the early victimisation of the player character and the iteration of violent spectacle, creates within the player a desire to master, allowing them to overcome their initial victimisation and reclaim their (masculine) agency.

Toby Smethurst and Stef Craps’ (2015) article ‘Playing with Trauma: Interreactivity, Empathy, and Complicity’ has already made the connection between the unique gameness of games and their ability to position the player within traumatic events such that emotional reactions can be elicited and the player can be made to feel somehow complicit in the traumatic events. They argue that ‘games work with the concept of psychological trauma in ways that are unprecedented in other media’ (Smethurst & Craps, 2015: 271). This chapter extends Smethurst and Craps’ discussion by placing it within a theoretical framework that draws on previous literature on vicarious trauma, witnessing, and the deployment of spectacle in games. Smethurst and Craps focus their discussion on a close reading of The Walking Dead: Season One (Telltale Games, 2012), using cognitive science and literary theory to draw out the various mechanical and narrative mechanisms by which empathy and emotion might be evoked. In this chapter I predominantly draw on trauma theorists, discussions of ‘witnessing’ and psychoanalysis to reflect on the mobilisation of traumatic themes and imagery during the opening levels of AAA video games. While there is overlap between this discussion and Smethurst and Craps’ article – namely that we are both interested in questioning how the player empathically and emotively relates to these themes – both the focus of our discussions as well as the analysis is divergent. While I am, like Smethurst and Craps, interested in the particular emotions and feelings of complicity elicited through the tropes and themes of trauma, I situate this within a
wider framework of spectacle, melodrama, vulnerability in order to question how these early traumas attach the player to game outcomes, and how particular responses may be elicited through traumatic, spectacular, melodramatic tropes.

**Theoretical Basis**

In its exploration of traumatic spectacle in gaming, this chapter does not seek to engage with ‘real world’ instances of trauma, that is, a person’s response to overwhelming levels of stress which impacts their ability to regulate their emotional state. Rather, it is concerned with the representation of traumatic experiences as a narrative and ludic device. It discusses how the vicarious trauma of witnessing and participating in interactive media operates affectively and immersively.

**Vicarious Trauma**

In clinical settings, vicarious trauma refers to occasions when clinicians ‘feel the pain evoked by empathy arousing mechanisms interacting with their own previous traumatic experience’ (Hoffman, 2003: 17, in Kaplan, 2005: 88). In her book *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (2005) E. Ann Kaplan asks whether vicarious trauma in those who have viewed mediated traumatic events can ‘facilitate or interfere with pro-social individual or cultural change […] or might it] arouse anxiety and trigger defence against further exposure?’ (87). Kaplan concludes that spectators who witness mediated traumatic events may, depending on the literary and filmic techniques employed, experience vicarious trauma. They do not feel the protagonist’s trauma directly, but rather ‘feel the pain evoked by empathy’ (90) which in turn can arouse feelings from their own past traumatic experiences. Expanding this discussion of responses to mediated trauma, in his study of photographs depicting traumatic events from the Vietnam War, John Berger (1980, in Meek, 2010) argues that viewers can have two kinds of response – despair or indignation – and it is the latter which provokes action (which will usually be politically impotent due to our relative positioning in the field of global politics) (33).

Of course, in this study’s examination of the use of traumatic events in immersive gaming, I am not dealing with the mediatisation of ‘real’ traumatic events but rather the deployment of traumatic spectacle as a device intended to attach the
player to the game and the protagonist. Nevertheless, it is possible to extract elements from Kaplan and Berger’s discussion that are pertinent to making sense of this research. I propose that the witnessing of these early traumatic events in the game’s plotline could be thought of as a mode of vicarious trauma in that it functions to arouse empathy for, and identification with, the player character, thereby emotionally ‘tying’ the player into the outcome of the game’s narrative. Furthermore, as gaming is necessarily interactive, the inclusion of traumatic events means that the player goes beyond merely witnessing. As such, an exploration of how these traumatic images function needs to recognise this involvement and move beyond the current discussion of mediatised events, taking into account the constraints and freedoms which the player experiences as they play.

*Melodrama*

It is also useful to consider the genre of melodrama when discussing instances of vicarious trauma in gaming, as the use of traumatic mechanical and narrative devices overlaps to a large extent with key generic and cultural elements of melodrama. Academic understandings of melodrama have moved from the generic codes of a hero’s dramatic and emotional victimisation-cum-retribution, told using exaggerated body and face movements, to analyses of a mode of popular culture that moralises all relationships through presenting events and people as existing on a binary of good vs. evil. In her analysis of Fox News coverage of September 11, Elisabeth Anker (2005) states that melodrama goes beyond being a fictional genre, arguing that it is a cultural mode which ‘structures the presentation of political discourse and national identity’ (23). Anker concludes that this collective American national identity was forged through emotional identification with the role of the victim and hero. In its ‘continuous cycles of victimhood and revenge, pathos and action’ (Anker, 2007: 171), melodrama iterates the injury of the good by the evil in order to ‘sustain a legitimizing function and maintain a moral imperative’ (ibid.: 172). Thus, as a cultural form, melodrama demands an ethical (and, potentially, violent) response. In this chapter’s discussion and utilisation of melodrama I do not propose that AAA games adhere to melodrama as a historical and literary genre, nor do I believe it is possible to extract the gameplay context of melodrama from its cultural status. Rather, I wish to consider the cultural commonsense and recognisable moral standpoint of melodrama. Melodrama in this
sense is not unconnected with real life and ‘factual’ representational modalities of trauma. I go on to explore how melodrama enables affective identification and interpellates the player within specific subject positions. Through an examination of the player character’s position as a victim-hero, I argue that AAA games are overlaid with an ethical framework which allows both for a greater level of identification with the player character, as well as a legitimisation of, and recourse to, violent action within the gamespace.

_Spectacle_

This chapter attends to the melodramatic and traumatic instances of gameplay and game narrative and how they are presented as moments of spectacle. It employs Guy Debord’s notion of spectacle as outlined in his _The Society of the Spectacle_ (1995 [1967]). Spectacle, he argues, is ‘a social relationship between people that is mediated by images’ (Debord, 1995 [1997]: 12). It ‘unifies and explains a wide range of apparently disparate phenomena’ (ibid.: 14). The mobilisation of spectacle is ‘seductive’ in its ability to captivate and fascinate consumers and spectators, and it is through this seduction and the ability to ‘involve them in the semiotics of an ever-expanding world of entertainment, information and consumption [that spectacle is able to] deeply influence thought and action’ (Kellner, 2005: 25). Developed from Marx’s notions of commodity fetishism, alienation and reification, Debord’s concept of the spectacular construes spectators as separate, passive, and depoliticised subjects (ibid.: 25-26). The question of how far this passivity can be said to be applicable to the interactive process of gaming is explored later in this chapter.

Video games have already been recognised as being part of the economy of the spectacle, both in terms of their patterns of consumption as well as how they aid the development of specific skills required in the post-industrial economy of advanced technology and internet trading. In his broad overview of spectacular media, Douglas Kellner (2005) briefly considers the spectacle of violent gaming:

_These games are highly competitive, violent, and provide allegories for life under corporate capitalism and Terror War militarism. [...] While some game producers have tried to cultivate kinder, gentler, and more intelligent gaming, most of the_
best-selling corporate games are spectacles for predatory capitalism and macho militarism and not a more peaceful, playful, and cooperative world.

(30-31)

Turning more specifically to the use of spectacle within gaming, in his exploration of spectacle and gratification in beat ‘em ups¹, David Surman (2007) proposes that spectacle is deployed in two modes – that which is produced for the player (unalterable utilisation of spectacle within the game), and that which the player produces themselves (for example, skilful play as spectacle) (207). He terms the spectacular play which combines these two modes ‘reward-spectacle’ – moments of audial and visual spectacle-as-reward for executing precise, difficult and deadly fighting combos.

This chapter seeks to expand this discussion of spectacle, specifically vis-a-vis violent gaming, taking into account the active involvement that is a necessary component of gameplay, and questioning how the narrative and mechanical uses of traumatic and violent spectacle can aid in forming various play styles, ethical and affective responses, and gendered subject positions.

**Traumatic Prologues and Violent Spectacles**

All varieties of suffering are therefore the theme of drama, which promises to create out of them pleasure for the spectator.

(Freud & Bunker, 1960: 145)

The reliance on trauma and traumatic experience as a narrative device in the violently spectacular prologues of many AAA titles analysed for this research project is notable. In this section I present several examples of these instances of represented and vicarious trauma before moving on to a discussion of how they operate affectively. I argue that these prologues induce a feeling of vulnerability in several ways. Vulnerability and traumatic spectacle are in one sense a narrative-affective device intended to create a sense of confusion, panic and horror. However, they are also notably deployed before the player has fully internalised the controls, become familiar with the interface, and thus developed the specific gaming habitus needed for success;

¹ Beat ‘em up describes a video game genre that focuses on melee and hand to hand fighting.
in this sense, this vulnerability and traumatic spectacle operate within the mechanics of the game.

Traumatic events that unfolded in the opening levels of the AAA games studied in this project are deployed through several different narrative and mechanical forms. To aid this discussion, they have been broadly mapped into three common modes of representation. The first mode of representation focuses on the personal trauma of the player character. Existing within the narrative of the game, this trope is usually depicted through the character’s loss of a loved one or through their bodily injury. A good example of this mode of traumatic spectacle is in the prologue of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal, 2011). Within the first twenty minutes of gameplay, the player witnesses the kidnapping and presumed death of the player character’s ex-girlfriend. The co-workers whom the player character should be protecting (in their role as chief of security) are dead and dying throughout the level (fig. 4.1). And finally, the prologue closes with the brutal physical maiming of the player character. Similarly, in *Dishonored* (Arcane Studios, 2012), the death of the Empress (whom, again, the player character was sworn to protect) happens before the player’s eyes within the first ten minutes of gameplay (fig. 4.2). In both games, the player character must seek answers pertaining to these traumatic prologues – who attacked them and why? These events function as the narrative lynchpin of the entire game and are the primary narrative impetus for character action.

Figure 4.1
Dying co-workers in the opening of *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal, 2011)
The second mode is also a narrative device: the depiction of traumatic *world incidents* such as outbreaks of zombie-like diseases; alien, monster, or human-led attacks on the city or vessel of the player character; natural disasters; and the accompanying spectacular scenes of horror, chaos, destruction, and death that these events provoke. For example, at the beginning of all three games in the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare, 2007-2012), scenes of destruction and bodily harm are employed to create fear and awe of the enemy (figs 4.3 and 4.4).
The final type of traumatic device identified in this research is combat vulnerability. In many of the titles analysed, during the earliest stages of the game the player controls a character who is vulnerable; often, both within the gameplay (e.g. they possess no abilities) as well as the narrative (e.g. they are depicted as a vulnerable, young, or naive person). This is usually the character the player controls throughout the course of the game, but who has not yet acquired the skills the player will need to excel in combat – many games use the opening level as a training ground where the basic skill set needed for combat is taught. In the opening of The Last of Us (Naughty Dog, 2013), the player takes control of Sarah, a young American teenager and the daughter of the game’s protagonist (fig. 4.5). She is home alone during the outbreak of spores that turn people into crazed zombiesque enemies. The player only takes control of her dad, Joel, when Sarah’s leg is broken in their escape. Neither Sarah nor Joel are given any mechanical recourse to action if confronted by an enemy (beyond a few scripted quick-time events\(^2\) when playing as Joel). When carrying Sarah, if the player is too slow and Joel is caught by an enemy, he dies and the game forces a reload. At the end of the prologue, Sarah is shot by a member of the US army acting on official orders and dies in Joel’s arms (fig. 4.6).

\(^2\) As mentioned in chapter three, a ‘quick-time event’ (QTE) is a game mechanic whereby on-screen instructions prompt the player to perform a particular corresponding interaction with the interface in order for particular in-game events to successfully take place. A delay or incorrect interaction following the prompt often results in the failure of the intended action.
As can be seen in *The Last of Us* (2013), these three narrative devices are often employed in conjunction with each other. The thread tying these devices together is that they place the player character in positions where they are not yet powerful enough to do anything about the situations in which they find themselves – the death and destruction is inevitable. It takes place before the player has created their skilful gamer habitus (Kirkpatrick, 2012) and when the player character has not yet been furnished
with the abilities and/or weapons that endow them with particular capabilities within the game’s combat system. Thinking back to the discussion of ‘preferred playings’ and the ‘grain’ of a narrative in the second chapter, it is possible to see how these instances of traumatic spectacle – read in a ‘preferred’ manner – function to make the player feel impotent. Of course, these modes of traumatic spectacle are often present throughout the game, or at least punctuate the game experience, providing a rise and fall of dramatic intensity. But it is how these devices function at a point in the game when the player has not yet internalised the controls and does not yet ‘inhabit’ their character that make the examination of traumatic and spectacular prologues key in this thesis.

The next chapter explores how this initial mechanical impotence drives the player to accumulate forms of game capital such that they may overcome the obstacles of the game, spurred on by early traumatic spectacles, and thus beat the game through relentless accumulation. This chapter questions how this initial trauma and vulnerability operates affectively, and considers whether it could be said to be subtly gendered.

In the immersive research journal that was coded and analysed as part of this study, several entries highlighted the emotional affect created as part of these narrative and mechanical devices. This is not something I expected to experience, since the devices in question were present at points in the game (usually very early on) before I developed a connection to the characters, the world, or the story. They occurred before I had internalised the control system such that I began to relate to the player character as my character – as an extension of myself and under my control:

Putting me inside her young, inexperienced, small body made me feel more vulnerable as a player – surely, if I was playing as Joel, I would have a chance to outrun the infected or could potentially fight my way out or have access to weaponry – but why would the game force me to face infected when I was not physically capable of doing so? […] I feel very isolated in this world. At first, because I am Sarah, I feel isolated because my father is not there to protect me. Then, in the car, the radio is dead. […] The isolation, heightened by the dark and the chaos, is furthered by the feeling of vulnerability in playing Sarah, and then by playing Joel who cannot fight because he is carrying Sarah. The vulnerability is heightened by the panicked people. […] The chaos and panic all around you is infectious. It sucks you in. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: The Last of Us)
Although this journal entry was recorded within the first thirty minutes of gameplay in a story which takes many hours to be told, it highlights the emotionally affective use of early traumatic narrative and mechanical devices. Tracing my reaction to these early instances of traumatic and violent spectacle in my immersion journal, several feelings were strongly elicited. I not only felt vulnerability, fear and shock when playing through these openings, I also felt anger. However, it is the feelings of failure, frustration, and a desire for revenge which I believe are the most pertinent for this discussion.

The game hits you with the assassination of the Empress - the woman whose life it is your duty to protect. You are thrown into a dungeon and have no weapon and no clue as to how to use the controls. There is an immediate feeling of danger and helplessness. At that initial assassination, I had floundered with the controls because I had not been taught to use them. Thus, I did feel like I had somehow failed the Empress - even though I know her death was an inevitability in the narrative - I still felt like I'd failed from being useless with the controller. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: Dishonored)

At this stage of Dishonored (Arcane Studios, 2012), as with the opening level of most games, the player is given no control over the direction or outcome of the narrative. Yet, even with an awareness of its scripted and unalterable quality, the lack of control over both the player character and their inability to prevent the traumatic events can lead to feelings of impotence and failure. In their examination of trauma and non-player character deaths in The Walking Dead: Season One (2012), Smethurst and Craps (2015) note the ability of the video games form to make the player feel complicit, irrespective of whether it was their decisions/actions which led to the death. I now turn to how these traumatic devices operate to create feelings of impotence and a will for ethical response, before considering how they create a desire for mechanical mastery.

Provoking a Response: The Melodrama of Ethical Gaming

Eliza: ‘Hello Adam. Welcome to the edge. It's not the end of the world, but you can see it from here… Do you know where we are, Adam? We are at the Fulcrum point when society lies in the balance […] Do you believe you have the wisdom
to choose an appropriate future for mankind? Or do you trust mankind to find the answers on its own?’

(Deus Ex: Human Revolution, Eidos Montreal, 2011)

In this examination of melodrama and the mechanics of morality in contemporary AAA video games I do not seek to overlay a generic framework onto the medium of games. Rather, I am interested in what the cultural mode of melodrama can reveal about the emotionality of fiction when the depicted suffering is presented as demanding an ethical response. In her book Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature (2005) E. Ann Kaplan discusses melodrama’s ability to register (through acting as a mirror of ‘common’ trauma) and negotiate ‘the cultural traumas of modernity, including those of war, race, and gender’ (69). The ethical debates that AAA titles negotiate as part of their depiction of traumatic events often fall along these lines; questions about war, morality, and identity are woven into the narrative fabric of the use of traumatic scenes as an immersive-affective device.

John Berger (1980) asserts that photographs which depict suffering are dispelled through the way they create feelings of ‘moral inadequacy’ in the viewer (40, in Meek, 2010: 33). Thus, while they contain implicit criticisms of governments, ‘their effect is ultimately to depoliticise public response through feelings of impotence’ (ibid.: 33). There is a sense of helplessness on the part of the observer – a feeling of impotence in relation to the atrocities committed in the picture. Through an examination of the responses afforded by the game’s narrative and mechanics to the traumatic, melodramatic and spectacular events in AAA games, this thesis proposes that the emotional reaction to the witnessing of suffering acts to produce a different response in the player. The player witnesses the traumatic images and then, throughout the gameplay and narrative arc, are given the agency (which they can utilise if they have the skill) to enact political and personal change. There are various avenues through which this change may occur, and the player may be furnished with several options for narrative progression. For instance, whilst all games played for this research project required the player to defeat (kill or otherwise) those responsible for their initial trauma, that does not mean they will act ‘ethically’. They may choose to not perpetrate acts which would usually be deemed morally reprehensible by various groups and societies depending a variety of factors. Building on the literature around moral disengagement and violent gaming laid out in chapter one, the scope (and limitations) for ethical
response and player negotiation of ‘ethical’ play within these AAA games is explored more fully in chapter six.

In her discussion of a possible ethical response to witnessing trauma in photographs, Susan Sontag (2003) argues that photographs do not allow the viewer to build up an interpretation due to their lack of narrative coherence, and as such, a political response is only evoked because of the context within which the image is received (in Butler, 2009: 66). Judith Butler (2009) disagrees with these assertions and counters Sontag’s argument by proposing that the interpretation of photographs is not necessarily an active and deliberate act; it can happen against the will of the viewer ‘by virtue of the structuring constraints of genre and form on the communicability of affect. […] The photograph itself becomes a structuring scene of interpretation—and one that may unsettle both maker and viewer in its turn’ (67). This debate is pertinent when considering the melodramatic and spectacular elements of video games as, while melodrama is deployed within the narrative and as such is a process of continual negotiation between player and game, spectacle is often momentary. Yet, if we follow Butler’s arguments, we can view the temporality and lack of narrative coherence in video game spectacle as an affective form of communication.

**Ethical Decision-Making**

In the AAA titles analysed as part of this study, several games have not only made ethical decision-making a central part of the narrative, but have also made tangible some form of ethical binary (good vs. evil, selfless vs. selfish, deontological vs. teleological\(^3\)) and turned it into a mechanic of the game, thus enabling the player’s ‘game morality’ to be accrued, tracked, and scored (see fig. 4.7). These moral scores can act to open or close certain options available to the player and can even influence or determine the outcome of the game’s story. For example, in the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare, 2007-2012), ‘paragon’ and ‘renegade’ actions earn the player points. At certain levels, if the player also invests in the corresponding ‘charm’ and ‘intimidate’ talents, these points allow the player to make unique dialogue options, provide

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\(^3\) Very briefly, a deontological approach (also known as duty-based ethics) to ethical decision-making describes when the ends do not justify the means, whereas a teleological approach (results-oriented ethics) is when the means are justified by the end result.
alternative ways of dealing with situations, and may even give access to unique missions.

Figure 4.7
Paragon/renegade bars in *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007)

However, video game ethics are not true melodrama in that, while they usually present ethical choices along a good/evil binary, they do not necessarily judge the player for taking either path. Certain moral paths may, at first, appear to be weighted (in that they give more experience points\(^4\) [XP] or greater rewards) but the balance is usually restored to some degree over time in order that the game does not become unbalanced\(^5\). For example, Irrational Game’s *BioShock* (2007) allows the player to harvest young girls called Little Sisters for their Adam – a powerful substance stored within their bodies that enables the player to upgrade their abilities. Alternatively, the player can choose the ‘good’ path and free them, seemingly forgoing the chance to make the player character tougher, stronger, and more dangerous. However, if the player saves enough Little Sisters they will be rewarded with an amount of Adam (totalling a little less than they receive if they had made the decision to harvest the

\(^4\) Experience points (XP) are a unit of measurement. They are awarded for specific actions (such as defeating enemies or completing quests) which quantify a player character’s progression. Usually the accumulation of a set number of experience points allows the player to level up the player character, enabling them to become more powerful.

\(^5\) A game’s mechanics are ‘unbalanced’ if they are tuned such that certain items, weapons or abilities are over- or under-powered compared to enemy strength. Unbalanced gameplay can result in combat which is too easy or difficult, and is thus no longer pleasurable.
Little Sisters). This gifted amount of Adam for choosing the ‘good’ path renders the player character less comparatively powerful than one who has acted ‘evil’, yet it is enough for them to still maintain a competitive edge over enemies.

There can also be space for indeterminacy in many ethical decisions presented to the player. That is, ethical dilemmas which have no clear binary moral (right or wrong) options or outcomes. This is not a generic element of traditional melodrama. However, melodrama, both as genre and cultural mode, is useful in understanding and unpacking the narrative mechanisms that act to present, frame and insist upon the ethical conundrum which the player faces. The victim-hero’s journey is one of suffering, seeking retribution, and revenge against the villain, where their ultimate reward is ‘a more robust state of virtue than at the outset of the story’ (Anker, 2005: 25). Traumatic and melodramatic in-game events are thus used as a plot device that enables the use and depiction of violent spectacle and violent retribution. This device functions to demand a response from the player. Their experience of vicarious trauma through melodramatic tropes, spectacular violence, and combat vulnerability at a stage in the narrative when the immersive investment in the player character is new and developing acts to give the player a sense of responsibility and agency. The player knows that they did not cause this tragedy, but if they have generic knowledge of AAA titles they will be aware that, through investing time in developing skills and accumulating game capital (see chapter five), the game will give them the opportunity to avenge these wrongs and bring the situation somewhat under their control (for good or ill – many games give the player the choice to profit from the chaos). Chapter six of this thesis explores more fully the ethical decision-making present within games, the games’ moral ‘rules’, and potential player responses to ethical acts.

The traumatic spectacles deployed within games’ openings act as an enabling fiction; they demand an ethical response from the player and legitimate the use of violent action in seeking retribution. The violence demanded by the traumatic events is thus portrayed as ‘righteous’. In a medium and genre in which the primary mechanic is one of combat (few AAA titles do not involve violent combat) it is these early instances of spectacular, melodramatic traumas which enable the player to ‘buy into’ the moral rules of the combat-oriented mechanics of the game. As with the previous discussion, this point is also expanded further and tied into a broader examination of ethical gaming in the exploration of players’ moral habitus in chapter six.
Thus, in many AAA titles, the player’s ethical response and their relationship to the player character can be seen to be organised around an enactment of violence, victimisation, action, and retribution. This violence – often positioned as righteous or justified – enacted by the player character at the hands of the player is (often) both an unavoidable element of gameplay and an active process on behalf of the player. The player does not simply feel impotent in the face of traumatic spectacles, rather, they are intended to be interpreted ethically. They function as a metanarrative to incriminate the powerful (usually individual ‘baddies’, but sometimes also governments or institutions) who led to this trauma.

Moreover, the trauma of games’ openings is encountered in two ways. Firstly, it is encountered through representative means because the player views the trauma enacted through violent spectacle on the player character or the NPCs they care about. Secondly, it is encountered through individual means; as the player inhabits their character and fights their way through the game, the player character’s trauma becomes, to some extent, the player’s own. However, it is not the player’s ineffectiveness that led to the initial trauma and victimisation. Rather, the player is the antidote to that trauma. It is through their skills that the player character enacts vengeance on those who perpetrated the violence. I question, therefore, whether the traumatic spectacles of video games can be seen to act antithetically to mediated representations of ‘real’ trauma on account of video games’ ability to furnish the observer with agency and give them the tools to enact not only violent revenge, but also other ethical judgements and actions. Debord (1995) asserts that the spectacle of mass media, in its function as a tool of depoliticisation and pacification, is a ‘permanent opium war’ (30). Does this differ from the spectacles of gaming? Trauma in video games is not merely a narrative device used to permit the depiction and mechanics of violence in the quest for revenge; it also functions to evoke a response. Through the interactivity of gaming, this response also allows, and often demands, the player to experience direct ethical agency.

Identification with the Player Character Intensified by Vicarious Trauma

To take this further, I now consider the process of identification with player characters, and the immersive experience playing as them, vis-a-vis traumatic, melodramatic, spectacular or violent early narrative and gameplay devices. As I have shown, these
elements often occur at a point in the game when the player has not yet internalised the controls, and when they have no influence over the outcome. How is affective connection formed through this experience, and what kind of connection is this? In my immersive journal I found that melodramatic and traumatic in-game events which revolved around (or were enacted upon) my character enabled me to form a greater connection to that character:

I felt somehow connected to Jenkins [the player character] because of everything he had gone through during the first few hours of the game. Moreover, because he had been [injured and] rebuilt I felt a greater sympathy than if he had gone through some kind of emotional turmoil. This could be because putting a character through some kind of emotional turmoil is a common tactic used in both games and wider media in order to generate sympathy for and connection to a character. But also because of my own history with body dysmorphic disorder I was able to empathise with some of what I imagined he would be going through – feeling like a stranger in one’s own body, feeling that disconnect, understanding the impulse which would have led him to smash the mirror in his bathroom. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: Deus Ex: Human Revolution)

As illustrated in the example of Jenkins, I believe that the player’s emotional investment in their character is generated, in part, by melodramatic and violent spectacle enacted upon the player character, which not only acts as an enabling fiction legitimating the use of ‘righteous’ violence, but also creates immersive identification. We form a greater connection to a character when we see them going through traumatic events at a point in the game when we have not internalised the controls, and when they do not yet possess the skills and equipment needed to triumph. I believe this is because it is through such traumatic devices that the player understands the player character as the victim-hero of the story. Furthermore, the player knows that the game will then go on to allow them to master the controls and acquire skills and attributes, thereby eventually enabling them to beat the game. The victimisation of the player character thus provokes an affective, ethical and identificatory response.

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6 I discuss this journal entry in more detail in the conclusion to this thesis, in which I highlight how the reflexivity of this method highlights the affective dimension of gameplay experiences.
A trope common to most of the AAA titles analysed as part of this research was their presentation of the player character as special. The playable protagonist is often depicted as a heroic, capable survivor. When the option arises to choose the path of the anti-hero, this trope is still present in how the game places the player character as being above and apart from the NPCs of the gameworld. The player character’s influence is great and their contribution is marked. They endure physical violence and hardships in pursuit of their prize (fig. 4.8):

![Figure 4.8](image)

CDR Shepard as the bloodied hero of *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012)

You are more than a queen. *You are a hero.* You are Albion’s champion. Its protector... *Only you* can defeat the creature that dwells in the shadow.

*(Fable III, Lionhead Studios, 2010)*

Your own species can be destroyed with a single thought. But *you are different.* We have witnessed your actions in this cycle; the destruction of Sovereign, the fall of the Collectors. The Reapers perceive you as a threat, and I must understand why [...]. Your confidence is singular [...]. *Your victories are more than a product of chance.*

*(Mass Effect 3, BioWare, 2012)*

And *because of you* we found Halo. Unlocked its secrets. Shattered our enemy's resolve. Our victory – your victory – was so close. I wish you could have lived to
see it. But you belong to Reach. Your body, your armour – all burned and turned to glass. Everything, except your courage. That, you gave to us.

(*Halo: Reach*, Bungie, 2010)

While it is generically commonplace for the game to offer the player a chance to take on the role of hero, the mechanisms by which it achieves this need to be analysed if an understanding of the immersive and identificatory involvement of the player with the player character and the gameworld is to be theorised. How does the player’s immersion in a game where they play as the heroic, special player character create particular affects and what are the consequences of this mode of immersive identification? Previous research has demonstrated that players who have the opportunity to play as a character who possesses a greater level of a certain quality which the player idealises, but also believes that they lack (‘self-discrepancy’), will report reduced levels of self-discrepancy over time whilst playing as that character (Hefner *et al*., 2007: 41-42).

This ‘wishful identification’ (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005, in Hefner *et al*., 2007: 42) is reminiscent of Sigmund Freud’s discussion of the identificatory relationship of the theatre spectator to the story’s hero:

He feels like a ‘Misero, to whom nothing worth while [sic] can happen’; he has long since had to moderate, or better direct elsewhere, his ambition to occupy a central place in the stream of world events; he wants to feel, to act, to mold [sic] the world in the light of his desire—in short, to be a hero. And the playwright-actors make all this possible for him by giving him the opportunity to identify himself with a hero. But they thus spare him something also; for the spectator is well aware that taking over the hero’s role in his own person would involve such griefs, such sufferings and such frightful terrors as would almost nullify the pleasure therein. […] Hence his enjoyment presupposes an illusion.

(Freud & Bunker, 1960: 144-45)

Roger Luckhurst (2008) argues that we are living in a ‘trauma culture’ in which ‘extremity and survival are privileged markers of identity’ (2); they are part of our cultural consciousness, pervade the personal, political, and economic spheres, and can even be the sole reason for fame. The theme of survival is also highly present in AAA video games and is usually constituted as a major part of the player character’s identity.
The ability to survive is bound up in the player character’s heroic credentials; their toughness, abilities, and determination. The heroic-survivor persona is not only present in the game’s narrative; it is also evident in the game mechanics. Indeed, mechanically, the goal is to conquer and survive the game. Often, an objective of a particular period of gameplay can just be to survive, especially when nearing the end of the game (fig. 4.9).

By understanding this heroic player character in terms of enabling ‘wishful identification’, then, it is possible to view playing AAA video games as a distinctly gendered activity, in that these games continue to be organised along the lines of masculine activities; the military and war. The traits that players may idealise may have specific culturally gendered resonances. While it is important to recognise that ‘masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals’ (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), characteristics such as courage and dominance are culturally coded as masculine by the dominant culture of the United Kingdom and other western nations (Nyman, 1997). As such, the (anti-)heroes presented in this chapter would seem to enable ‘wishful identification’ for those who specifically value traits coded as masculine. While those who prize such characteristics may be of any gender, the fact that these heroes are a common character trope means that certain players may, through their preference for masculine traits, be more able to
immerse themselves further than a player for whom other characteristics are idealised. Hefner et al., (2007) acknowledge that ‘for other player groups (e.g., girls), alternative characters may be more favourable in terms of identification-based reduction of self-discrepancy’ (45). This, of course, presumes girls differently value certain characteristics, which needs to be separately investigated and supported. However, Jeroen Jansz (2005) recognises that male players ‘can safely embrace the game heroes’ violent performance of masculine identity without fearing moral reproach or ridicule by partners or peers’ (231-232, in Hefner et al., 2007: 42). Thus, the organising of AAA narratives around a heroic player character who embodies particular virtues which are generally understood as masculine could have a gendered effect on the player’s ability to identify with their character (irrespective of that character’s gender) and immerse themselves in the game. It is therefore not necessarily true that a greater representation of female avatars in gaming will directly lead to women being able to identify with those characters and immerse themselves within those games. The personalities, characteristics and traits of player characters are also an important component of player identification. This is significant for both the broader field of games studies and for game development. I return to the discussion of the gendered resonances of these tropes in the concluding section of this chapter.

The Spectacle of Sublime Technology

When questioning how the spectacle of gaming operates affectively, it is important to understand how the technology of video games contributes to this discussion. In order to highlight how the spectacle of technology is a mode of the immersive and affective spectacle of the praxis of gaming, in this section I draw on understandings of the technological sublime in order to situate the mechanisms by which players may relate to spectacular elements of gameplay. The following examination of the specific function of the mobilisation of (technologically) sublime imagery in games feeds into this chapter’s broader discussion of how traumatic witnessing and spectacle create within the player a desire to overcome, sublimate and master.

Sherryl Vint and Mark Bould (2009) draw on David E. Nye (2006 [1996]) in arguing that, during the twentieth century, a new form of the sublime appeared in developed nations. The awe, wonder and terror that was once elicited by witnessing
the overwhelming spectacle of untamed nature has shifted, and is now elicited by objects of technology:

Furthermore, the shift to the technological sublime entails a different affective experience. Instead of negative pleasure, a sense of human limits, the ‘technological sublime is built on a pleasure of a positive kind, for it concerns an apparently successful representation of man’s ability to construct an infinite and perfect world’ (Nye, 2006: 31).

(Vint & Boud, 2009: 270)

The technological sublime does not have a ‘consistent boundary between the self and the machine’ (Shinkle, 2012), and has been specifically applied to the illusion of computer-generated imagery (hereafter CGI). While witnessing CGI we are simultaneously aware that the images have been laboriously coded, and can still witness and accept the illusion of the created world. Vint and Bould (2009) assert that it is the CGI-ness of the illusion – it’s ‘clumsiness’ – which gives us access to this sublime knowledge (240). They proceed to argue that sensations of the mastery of technology are heightened when CGI presents us with the illusion of a dystopia:

For a brief moment, the thrill of the sublime is present as we revel in the spectacle of desertified ruins. Our ability to simulate ‘nature’ restores our sense of cognitive mastery, even while the spectacle of a devastated Vegas, that celebration of capitalist triumph, expresses anxiety about the future. While the CGI sublime both represents and exemplifies the power of human technological mastery, its marriage to the apocalyptic imagination reveals a Derridean trace of terror at the heart of the Kantian sublime. This ambivalence is mirrored in the film [I am Legend] itself, which depicts a future of genetic engineering gone awry [...] but which nonetheless utterly relies upon digital technologies.

(Vint & Boud, 2009: 272)

This is an important contribution to this discussion because, as I have already noted, AAA titles are often set in dystopian contexts due to their need to present the player with spaces where violent spectacles – and the violent retribution which follows this –
are congruous with the overall fantasy of the presented gameworld. In his doctoral thesis exploring the digital sublime and how it can be used to aid game development, Thomas Betts (2014) concludes that ‘video games present an alluring invitation to become lost in the generative space of code and imagination [and offer] a new version of the sublime that is moulded by the virtual world and reflects the unique traits and concerns of that space’ (130).

**The Sublime Technology of AAA Gaming**

When analysing the titles that comprised this study, I noted several instances of what I term ‘forced looking’; whereby the game gives the player no option but to bear witness to the spectacle of its creator’s mastery over technology (or at the very least draws the attention of the player to the beauty or impressiveness of the world they created). A good example of this is in *Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception* (Naughty Dog, 2010). After wandering in the desert for days, slowly dying of dehydration and chasing mirages, Nathan Drake (the player character), comes across an abandoned desert ruin. After observing the ruin and disappointingly noting its lack of inhabitants, Drake falls down the face of a tall sand dune. Sat exhausted at the bottom, he gazes at the ruin and waits for the player to move him on. If the controller is not touched, he will lie there indefinitely, staring ahead (fig. 4.10). Whilst ostensibly this serves to visually underscore Drake’s precarious situation (he is exhausted, dehydrated, and apparently no closer to civilisation), it also affords the player a chance to survey the beauty of the created ruin. In my playthroughs, this vista and situation, coupled with the emotive accompanying music, elicited feelings of the sublime:

As Drake sits in the sand after falling down the dune, surveying with dismay the ghost city, *I allowed the game to pause on this moment*. The music here was so beautiful and Drake was so tired. *I sat and watched and listened for several minutes*. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: *Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception*)

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7 Dystopian narratives, and the anxieties they resonate with, are discussed further in the next chapter.
8 As mentioned in chapter three, ‘playthrough’ refers to the playing of a game in its entirety – from start to finish.
Likewise in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), the game does not only contain beautiful landscapes filled with breath taking vistas of snow-capped mountains, forests of pine, frozen rivers, and skies filled with stars and aurora borealis (fig. 4.11); it also draws the player’s attention to such imagery through your companion’s comments on fantastical structures (‘That’s... That’s... Wow!’).
As I climbed the Throat of the World to meet Paarthurnax, the northern lights danced above my head. It is a phenomenon I have seen twice in real life in northern Finland, but these lights covered a greater spectrum of colour and danced and wavered in the night sky. I felt very peaceful and enraptured watching them, even with the howling wind, and I stood for a long time marvelling at them before continuing on. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim)

Paul Martin (2011), in his article ‘The Pastoral and the Sublime in The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion’ (Bethesda Game Studios, 2006), considers how the familiarity, interactivity, and danger of video games’ landscapes renders them more picturesque than sublime:

The centrality of action to games means that while the landscape may be initially presented to the player as sublime, especially in the opening cut-scene, the player is also equipped with the means of encountering the landscape in such a way as to make it familiar and banal. […] An important element of the sublime is the distance between the feeling subject and the terrifying object. If the object is a real threat, the sublime no longer holds sway. The [video game] landscape that was terrifying and distant now becomes a threat. [While] the game, after all, is not exactly dangerous […] the player is expected to perform in, and not solely contemplate, the vast and treacherous landscapes of [the game]. [original emphasis]

(Martin, 2011: n. pag.)

Martin acknowledges that the sublime may still be present in moments of playing, but not in a sustained manner due to the dangers and banality of the gameworld. My journal entries sit comfortably with Martin’s argument as I experienced the awe, wonder and fear of the sublime during instances where my attention was actively called to spectacular imagery (through forced looking for instance). I suggest that, despite this movement between sublime (and safe) image to interactive danger, the landscapes and gameworlds of video games can still be considered to mobilise elements of the sublime. In both of the gaming experiences documented in the journal entries above, I felt moved by the scenery within the game, and took the time to survey
them as I might a beautiful natural landscape. However, as I go on to show in the next section, I also felt a sense of wonder due to their being an \textit{artefact}. Whilst I felt awe at their beauty, I also felt impressed at their created-ness, and I reflected appreciatively on the abilities of the artists and coders in the games’ development teams.

\textit{Reflecting on the Technological Sublime}

Can these spectacular instances of technological wonder and artistic beauty be seen to draw attention to, and underscore, the mastery of the developers and programmers? In this section, I consider how this (calling attention to the game’s) technical and artistic impressiveness functions to elicit feelings of the technological sublime in the player. When analysing my own research journal vis-a-vis my witnessing of the technological sublime, I found many entries that point not only to the affective response of witnessing the aesthetic beauty of the scene, but also highlight the awareness of the technological mastery needed to create this CGI world:

Going around the ledge as I approached the chateau afforded me a good look at the landscape, including the building and surrounding wilderness. \textit{I found it very beautiful} – the colours and sense of depth. The tranquillity and other worldliness to the ruined chateau made me \textit{feel quite enraptured}, and I lingered on the movement so I could take it all in and appreciate the view and the \textit{hard work the developers} must have put into it. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: \textit{Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception})

Going up to Panchea in the shuttle is spectacular and beautiful. I \textit{took the moment to linger} on the beautiful depiction of skimming the edge of the Earth’s atmosphere and to just \textit{marvel at the work the art department and the programmers} had done on bringing it all about. Interestingly, \textit{considering the work that had gone into the game} didn’t pull me out of the narrative immersion, but just increased my connection to it as I felt it was well-crafted. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: \textit{Deus Ex: Human Revolution})

Columbia is spectacularly beautiful and colourful. I found it visually so rich that I often just \textit{spent time looking} around at the scenery and marvelled at it – both
how beautiful it was and how talented the art team and programmers must have been to create such a city. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: BioShock Infinite)

The game environment is very visually and audibly rich. The walk through the woods with Ellie towards Bill's town is sublime. There are animals and insects, the plants are very lush. It is in such stark contrast to the trek through the abandoned buildings (in that it is clean and bright). I explored that small map for some time, going over the same ground, just looking at the environment and marvelling at the artistry and work which had gone into creating it. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: The Last of Us)

A theme running throughout my research journal entries is that of such moments where I describe the sensation of the technological sublime; the awareness that the world I was witnessing was a created entity, a fiction of technological prowess. The technological sublime is bound up with sensations similar to those elicited by the Romantic concept of the sublime – feelings of awe, wonder, and terror – and yet it is markedly different. By being based in an overcoming of nature and technology (a mode of mastery) the technological sublime is fundamentally different to the Romantic sublime’s focus on a vast and unconquerable natural world. This is a key consideration as I move on to a discussion of the desire to master which is a potential response to early instances of traumatic and violent spectacle. Such feelings of mastery are mirrored here in the technological sublime’s positive feelings towards the mastery and overcoming of technology.

As ‘true sublimity must be sought only in the mind of the judging person, not in the natural object the judging of which prompts this mental attunement’ (Kant, 1987 [1790]: 113, in Betts, 2014: 123) then the discussion here needs to be tempered with a recognition that my experiences of the technological sublime whilst gaming are, of course, subjective. Nevertheless, the ways in which the game call the player’s attention to impressive imagery within the gameworld (via forced looking, NPC comments, and so on) mean that a response is expected, even if it is not successfully elicited.

It is important to this chapter’s later consideration of the potential gendered (and also raced and classed) resonances of the tropes and themes discussed here, that I
briefly note the implicit experience of racial whiteness in the Kantian experience of the sublime. The Kantian sublime is reached through the overcoming or domination of nature through the power of reason. This concept became ‘an enabling trope of European expansionism’ (Perera, 2011: 37). The Western (white, male, middle/upper class) subject is the only one who can, through their reason and imagination, subliminate.

‘In the context of this theatre of sublime trauma [a tsunami or similar] as representational and affective spectacle, the Western subject is positioned both as spectator and actor, a benevolent interventionist (as colonizer, missionary, aid organisation, or volunteer)’ (Perera, 2011: 37). Thus the sublime is highly raced. It is worth considering, then, whether the positioning of the player character as an affective-immersive process of mastery thus follows enlightenment thinking and is centred on an assumption of a white, male subject. Certainly, in her discussion of player exploration (and domination) of maps and gamespace, Sybille Lammes (2008) asserts that historical strategy games give players ‘ludic powers of marking territories and empires and can thus create their own (post) colonial stories by translating world histories into personal stories (94). The AAA games studied here do not contain the same struggle for territory present in the strategy games Lammes discusses. Nevertheless, the mechanical process of overcoming and mastering is common to both. While strategy games are more overtly raced through their utilisation of colonialist themes of conquering territory, the AAA games which contain elements of the sublime can also be argued to have raced (and classed) resonances. In the final section of this chapter, I also bring the technological sublime into this consideration of the gendered resonances of AAA games, arguing that, modes of mastery present in the technological sublime could be argued to have distinctly masculine overtones. Thus we can observe a sense in which AAA games satisfy the notion that gameplay supports a raced and gendered imperative. In the next section I consider how the narrative tropes and game structures in AAA games discussed in this chapter (trauma, the sublime, and vulnerability) affectively motivate the player to overcome the challenges they face, and thereby master the game.

**Mastering the Game**

Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade’s (1996) controversial tactics of using shock and awe in warfare is a ‘strategy designed to produce terror based on spectacular
display of techno-dominance. Shock and Awe is clearly premised on, and mobilizes, the effects of sublime terror’ (Perera, 2011: 39). In the previous section, I demonstrated how spectacular displays in video games can provoke certain affects and emotions such as fear, shock and awe in the player. It is also imperative to consider the mobilisation of spectacle within gaming vis-à-vis the inter(re)activity of games (Smethurst & Craps, 2015). Due to the interactivity, reactivity, and agency afforded by video games (as well as their iterative temporality), there is potential for the player to respond to such displays. They do not merely passively witness the sublime and spectacular imagery. The game (sometimes) also allow them to enact ethical response whereby the player character is positioned as the rational subject who can achieve the effect of the sublime. In the conclusion to this chapter I discuss whether such displays also create a desire to master.

AAA games offer a plane of sublimation and mastery to the player; their mobilisation of sublime imagery, trauma and spectacle encourages the player character to assume a controlling, sublimating role. The narrative and mechanical goal is to achieve, conquer, control, win, and master. They are a space designed to challenge and test the player, but ultimately, to be overcome. Krzywinska and Brown (2015) recognise how the player’s sense of mattering and achievement is pivotal in gaming (as discussed in chapter one of this thesis), arguing that ‘game designers actively want to convince players that they have achieved something: this endeavour was not time wasted but yielded achievement and progress, confirming therefore a sense of existence’ (201). Video games are organised such that attempts to ‘win’ are iterative; in most AAA games, failure is impassable. Losing in combat is often accompanied by the death of the player character, a black screen or message of failure, and a menu appears, allowing the player to load from a previous save file or autosave (fig. 4.12). In most video game combat scenarios, therefore, failure is not a valid option. The player must repeatedly attempt challenges in order to finally master them:

Each has a core gameplay dynamic on which much of the pleasure it offers is based, a particular kind of activity at which the successful player has to become proficient, largely through a process of extended temporal engagement; playing again and again – and again – until further progress is made, the player coming to a closer understanding of the underlying logic of the game.

(King & Krzywinska, 2006: 3)
Freud theorised that the compulsion to repeat unpleasure allows one to gain mastery over a situation:

How [can the] repetition of a distressing experience as a game reconcile itself with the pleasure principle? Freud suggested two possibilities: […] the yield of pleasure in mastery […] [and as] an act of revenge on his mother for leaving, an act suppressed in real life. Both these ideas have obvious resonance in terms of the pleasure of the spectator of the disaster movie: watching the repetition of the movie gives the spectator a certain amount of mastery over it; furthermore, the spectator is to a certain extent (and particularly with regard to television) in control of the manner of its reception.

(Smith, 2005: 56)

The iteration of video game experiences, which may often be distressing or unpleasurable, not only gives the player the ability to master along the lines of Freud’s movie viewer. More than this, their repeated attempts culminate in mastery and dominion of many kinds – of the controls, of the character, of the overall game. It is important to consider, then, how this necessary cycle of failure, repetition, and eventual mastery functions to create specific affects.

The emotions elicited as part of my gameplay experience attest to the relationship between sublimation and mastery; both of which, as I have already stated,
are necessary components of the gaming process. Feelings of pride, aggression, control, failure and disgust are bound up in the player’s negotiation of this challenge:

Daud [the antagonist] said: ‘It [being endowed with specific, otherworldly and deadly combat skills] felt good; made me believe I was powerful.’ I felt a sense of shock there because that was exactly how I had been feeling. After killing Daud, the Outsider asked: ‘was it [revenge and my utilisation of these deadly combat skills] for the Empress and Emily, or was it the primal desire to rise above other men?’ I wasn’t sure.

(Immersive Research Journal: Dishonored)

When I overcame challenges, solved puzzles, defeated bosses and unlocked achievements, I felt a sense of power and mastery. It felt good; I had achieved. I not only experienced a greater sense of identification with my (anti-)heroic player character, but also a greater sense of self-worth and self-power. My self-discrepancy was negated through wishful identification. In its necessity as both a narrative and mechanical device, mastery and sublimation can therefore be seen not only as a central process of gaming, but also as an affective device.

**Gendered Resonances**

As already touched upon, many of the game elements, structures, and mechanic tropes discussed throughout this chapter appear to have distinctly masculine resonances – mastery, sublimation, courage, heroic domination, and overcoming. However, there is another potential gendered dimension to this chapter’s discussion worth briefly exploring. Whilst this thesis’ analysis and argument is predominantly positioned within the social-semiotic, this chapter’s discussion of trauma, desire, and mastery warrants a note on the potential psychoanalytic reading of these devices and the way they potentially work to motivate the player and structure both their in-game actions and affective responses. By considering the initial trauma of the player character in psychoanalytic terms, it is possible to regard the game’s traumatic and spectacular openings discussed here as functioning to place the player within a feminised subject position. That is, they are initially inserted into a position of lack from which they have
to recover agency through a *phantasy of action*\(^9\). The trauma of the player’s lack of power resonates with the psychoanalytic loss of the phallus (that which endows the person). This stimulates mourning for the lost object; a desire for reclamation which the player then enacts as they progress through the game.\(^10\) Reclamation of the lost phallus – the power the player can access throughout the game, embodied in the in-game capital they accrue – enables the player to assume a male subject position by the end of the game.

**Conclusion**

Smethurst and Craps (2015) have already identified that traumatic game content (such as NPC deaths), when coupled with a games interreactivity, can function to elicit feelings of responsibility and empathy in the player. This chapter sought to take a different approach to this issue by focusing instead on common elements to the AAA games studied. I explored the early narrative and mechanical traumas of game prologues and argued that they function to make the player feel vulnerable (both within the narratives and the game mechanics). These affective spectacles in AAA games act as an enabling fiction which permits the player to seek (violent) retribution. Taken together, this trauma and spectacle functions not only to tie the player into a deeper identificatory relationship with the victim-hero-survivor player character, but also to demand an ethical response – a response which can only be enacted through the performance of legitimate violence in the name of retribution and ‘winning’. I argue that this ability to sublimate and master is a core gaming mechanic. I examined instances of ‘forced looking’ and (technologically) sublime landscapes. In considering the (technological) sublime, I have shown how the pleasure and importance of mastery is further underscored through the way the beauty and created-ness of the gameworld is called to the attention to the player.

Following on from the discussion in chapter two into identification and empathy with both the player character and NPCs, this chapter has further demonstrated that violent, immersive video games can be seen to provide various sites and modes of

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\(^9\) A phantasy of action allows ‘the projective recovery of the phallus (power in the social world)’ (Steinberg, 2015: 123).

\(^10\) This is relevant to the following chapter’s discussion of the means by which the player can overcome their initial trauma and master the game (namely, through the acquisition of in-game capital which function to endow them and make them increasingly powerful).
identification. There are many various affective and immersive elements discussed in this chapter which are employed to attach the player to the gameworld and the outcome of the playthrough. For instance, the early victimisation of player character, the common trope of the victim-hero-survivor player character, and the deployment of [technologically] sublime imagery. Through deploying these elements, many AAA titles can be seen to narratively and mechanically situate the player within a subject position that is predicated on a mode of mastery which is rooted in a form of white, Western masculinity. Expressions of masculinity and class as potentially encoded within the game mechanics are considered in the next chapter, in which in-game accumulation and the concurrent development or purchasing of the player character’s abilities is considered as forms of game capital and neoliberal self-mastery respectively.
I feel very compelled to collect all the items – weapons, clothing, hairstyles, makeup, tattoos, facial hair etc., to dig up all the treasure and open all the chests. Not only because I know they are finite and it is possible to collect them all (if it is possible, then I want to do it and experience everything the game has to offer) but also because the game collects stats and sometimes rewards you – i.e. achievement for all the clothes, all gauntlets used in combos, all weapons collected and traded etc. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: Fable III)

The path to your goal is long and awash with enemies. You tackle them each in turn, picking over the bodies as you go. Lists of items flash before your eyes. You consider each for a split second, taking and discarding, balancing need and worth with weight and size. Each kill brings experience and you watch greedily as your meter fills. Only a few more until you can level-up. Coins lurk in corners, illuminated softly with an eye-catching glow. Grabbing them, a pop-up alert at the edge of your screen informs you (and any friend who may be online) that you are now wealthy enough to have unlocked the ‘Rich’ achievement. The boss approaches. You check your inventory, consuming a single-use item to boost your attributes. Engaging in a battle of attrition, you switch between tactics searching for a weakness, exchanging your ranged weapon for melee. Finally, just as your health is running critically low, your enemy is slain. Another achievement pops. The experience meter fills and you hear that satisfying, triumphal sound indicating your character’s progression. Purchasing your new ability, you look forward to trying it out in the next battle – you’ve just become that little bit
harder to kill. You loot the boss’ corpse, grabbing and equipping the unique and valuable items therein, before heading on to your next adventure.

This experience is not taken directly from a particular game played during the course of this research, and yet in some ways it is true to all of them. Accumulating in order to gain power, so common and necessary to AAA games, is problematised in this chapter. To do so, the imperative to accumulate is explored and analysed. I show how many of the games studied contain explicit criticisms (both anxious and humorous) about late-capitalist ideology. However, their mechanics seem to work at cross-purposes to this approach in that they track and incentivise the rampant, necessary accumulation of beneficial tools, aids, items and points, which I term ‘game capital’.

This chapter picks up the theoretical discussion of trauma and mastery from the previous chapter, focusing in on the specific activities in-game which enable the player-player character to develop and become powerful. Drawing on Foucault’s notions of panopticonism and disciplinary power, this chapter demonstrates how the accumulation of game capital (which can be material or immaterial, in-game and metagame, and varies between titles) is an affective, seductive mechanic of gaming. I argue that the incentivisation to accumulate these forms of capital motivates player action and encourages viewing the player character as a ‘project’ on which one ‘works’.

Taking this view enables me to theorise the relationship between accumulation and forms of game capital as ‘technologies of the self’. I claim that this accumulating, self-improving and investing player occupies a neoliberal, middle-class subject position. Finally, I conclude that this core contradiction present in these (and many other) AAA games acts affectively to negate critique.

In this chapter I present and discuss certain actions which are a necessary element of accumulating these different forms of game capital – stealing, killing, looting corpses and so on – which need to be ethically problematised as part of their discussion. The ethical desensitising and disengaging capabilities of these forms of capital is explored more fully in the following chapter.

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1 Whilst most of the games researched in this project contain many, if not all of the elements described here, there was one game which was an outlier in many respects; Heavy Rain (Quantic Dream, 2010), as an interactive story, was mechanically unique compared to the other titles in that the logic of accumulation was present, but not overtly. For instance, while the game revolved around collecting clues, and there were indeed trophies which could be unlocked (this is discussed later in the chapter), there was no system of barter, levelling, or statistical judgement which were common elements to the other games analysed. This is evidence that while many AAA games may follow the pattern of accumulation for success outlined in this chapter, this mechanic is not necessary for an engaging, compulsive, and successful game.
**Theoretical Basis**

As this discussion is centrally concerned with the activity of accumulation in order to achieve these goals, the action of accumulation as well as the self-mastery and work which the player puts into developing their player character is, I believe, best understood by considering the relationship between the player and the character they develop. By ‘character’, I am referring firstly to the player character in whom the player must ‘invest’ and on whom they must ‘work’ in order to succeed. By using this term, I also incorporate the notion of a broader ‘playing character’, developed as the player seeks to accumulate rewards and overcome challenges. That is, both the player’s own development as they nurture the specific skills which constitute their gamer habitus (Kirkpatrick, 2012) and enable them to successfully participate in gameplay, as well as their investment in (and accumulation of) the specific game tools and player character abilities which facilitate successful play.

In this thesis’ discussion and analysis of game mechanics and the playing subject I chart the restrictive and motivational mechanisms as part of the game’s rules which, when encountered by the immersed player, potentially produce particular affective responses. In so doing, I predominantly treat the game world as the producing world and question what positions it allows or encourages us to assume. However, following on from the discussion of agency and the subject in the second chapter of this thesis, I do not present player action as being wholly determined by game structures. I utilise my immersive research journal entries to highlight how these structures can be affectively negotiated.

For the purpose of this research, Foucault’s thinking about disciplinary power and technologies of the self – set up in chapter two – are the most appropriate tools with which to consider the activity and function of this accumulation. As the game mechanics act as structures which restrict, discipline, and reward, the player is necessarily involved within the logic of the game. Also, following on from the discussion of identification, trauma and ‘overcoming’ in chapter four, this chapter also draws briefly upon psychoanalytic theories of desire in order to gain critical purchase on the function of tracked and incentivised accumulation in pursuit of mastery. However, there is an inherent discord between the two theoretical spheres on which this chapter draws. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978) Foucault critiques Freud’s discourse on sexuality as a metanarrative; a biopolitical mechanism of exercising
control through the encouraged act of confession by patients. However, as explained in chapter two, by drawing predominantly on Foucauldian thinking about the diffusion of power whilst holding this in tension with psychoanalytic theories of desire, this chapter is able to consider the affective and motivational terrain of power and game structures. In utilising elements of both psychoanalytic and Foucauldian analysis I am hoping to reveal how the restrictions and freedoms of the game, their potential to motivate, and their affective resonances, might be seen to encourage the playing character to assume particular modes of play, and thus particular (gendered, raced, or classed) subject positions.

Neoliberalism

This chapter builds on, and extends, chapter two’s discussion of disciplinary power by considering how the player is interpellated within a subject position that is ideologically neoliberal. Originally a term used to describe an economic philosophy, neoliberalism has expanded to encompass economic as well as political and social ideology. Its difficulty to define stems from the breadth of its use; it has come to mean different things to different people. Pierre Bourdieu (1998) defined neoliberalism as financial deregulation and the shifting of responsibility for services (such as education and health care) onto the individual (para. 5). Labelling it a ‘strong’ discourse, he asserts that it aims to ‘create conditions under which the “theory” can be realised and can function: a programme of the methodical destruction of collectives’ [original emphasis] (para. 4).

As Dennis Geef (2015) sets out in his doctoral thesis ‘Late Capitalism and its Fictitious Futures: The Postmodern, Science Fiction, and the Contemporary Dystopia’, it is possible to broadly map the main thrusts of neoliberal ideology – as applied to the economic, political, and social spheres – into three points. Firstly, the privatisation of state owned industries, services, and utilities. Secondly, the deregulation of financial markets. And thirdly, neoliberal ideology can be said to be Socially Darwinian. Some have argued that it is this third Socially Darwinian pillar of neoliberal ideology which is the most ‘insidious’ (Geef, 2015: 55), as it possesses the ability to exert influence (via the use of capital) over ‘communities, schools and mass media’ (Wilson, 2002: 237, in Geef, 2015: 91). The result is the socialisation of the population to the extent that such beliefs come to be seen as commonsensical. It is this which leads Stephen
Ball and Antonio Olmedo (2013), drawing on Bronwyn Davies and Eva Bendix Peterson’s (2005) work on the neoliberal restructuring of higher education, to describe neoliberalism as ‘seductive’, ‘performative’, and a ‘new regime of truth’ (Ball & Olmedo, 2013: 87-88):

The apparatuses of neoliberalism are seductive, enthralling and overbearingly necessary. It is a ‘new’ moral system that subverts and re-orientates us to its truths and ends. It makes us responsible for our performance and for the performance of others. We are burdened with the responsibility to perform, and if we do not we are in danger of being seen as irresponsible. ‘There are two technologies at play here turning us into governable subjects - a technology of agency and a technology of performance’ (Davies and Peterson, 2005: 93). We are produced rather than oppressed, animated rather than constrained!

(Ball & Olmedo, 2013: 88)

Maurizio Lazzarato (2009) claims that neoliberal ideology ‘individualises, insecuritises, and depoliticises’ (109) the social order. Neoliberalism and neoliberal ideology, therefore, contain consequences for the individual subject. Foucault (2010) differentiates neoliberalism from classic liberalism by arguing that it is competition and not exchange which is the defining factor. This shift to competition contains within it ontological connotations for the neoliberal individual, whom Foucault saw as being ‘an entrepreneur of himself’, or ‘homoæconomicus’ (226). In Ball and Olmedo’s (2013) examination of how neoliberal ideology functions in relation to the individual subject, specifically school teachers, they conclude that it interpellates individuals as ‘enterprising subjects’ and that neoliberal ideology is performative (90). Judith Butler (1988) uses the term ‘performativity’ to describe the way gender is brought into being through utterances: ‘gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed’ (527). Performativity differs from performance in that it is not just an act, but produces a series of effects – one being the creation of the (gendered or otherwise) subject. Discourse produces both gendered subjects and gender itself. Considering Ball and Olmedo’s article, the repetition of neoliberal discourses produce the neoliberal subject. Like gender, this performative neoliberalism can be seen to be an accomplishment – a stylised repetition of acts; ‘the act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that’s been going on
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before one arrived on the scene’ (Butler, 1988: 526). The need to constantly perform a neoliberal self, matched with rigorous and frequent performance assessment, produces for these teachers, a neoliberal self. The concluding theoretical section of this chapter considers how the playing subject encounters the logic of accumulation present in this study’s AAA video games, and highlights the way the player is positioned as a neoliberal, enterprising subject.

Capital

This chapter also draws on the notion of ‘capital’ by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu (1986) developed his concept of capital to explain the accumulated labour which, ‘when appropriated on a private, i.e. exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour’ (46). Bourdieu theorised three forms of capital – economic, cultural and social. Other academics have extended his work by positing the existence of other forms of capital, such as gender capital (Bridges, 2009; Huppatz, 2012), emotional capital (Gendron, 2004; Reay, 2004; Zembylas, 2007), and moral capital (Wang, 2015). In this chapter I utilise Bourdieu’s notion of capital in order to highlight how games track and reward player effort in various ways. In deploying the concept of capital within this thesis I make the distinction between in-game capital (the various modes of capital which are accumulated through player labour and function to make gameplay easier or more interesting) and metagame capital (which is also accumulated through player labour, but exists within the metagame and as such functions as a form of social capital between players). Utilising Bourdieu’s concept of capital in this chapter allows me to critically assess how the various items, abilities, and statistics (explored later) within AAA games function to endow the player in specific ways necessary to eventual success.

I now move onto examining the way that narratives in the AAA games studied often contained anxieties about capitalism, rampant accumulation, and self-interest. I show how these themes are used as an affective device. These narrative themes are then contrasted with an examination of the necessary logic of accumulation which is

2 As mentioned in previous chapter, the term ‘metagame’ refers to those elements of the game which are outside of the game itself.
present in the game mechanic. I problematise the player’s affective relationship to this logic and question how it positions the player before considering how this core contradiction works to negate criticism.

**Anxiety, Dystopia, and Capitalism in the Game Narrative**

While this chapter is predominantly interested in exploring the mechanics of accumulation, the focus on collecting and utilising various forms of game capital (outlined later) and the associated treating of the player character as a ‘project’ means that the narrative framing of the games also requires some exploration. The AAA games examined in this project routinely contain elements of dystopia and parody of late-capitalist values. Many, for instance, are set in post-apocalyptic worlds or explicitly critique wealthy and powerful individuals. Considering the narrative framing highlights the juxtaposition between the anxiety and humour which surround accumulation, capital and capitalism within game narratives, with the core game mechanic of ‘having’ and ‘spending’. In his paper ‘Playing as resistance to capitalism: BioShock as the reifications of neoliberal ideals’ (2012), Thijs van den Berg recognises how late capitalist ideologies are infused in the narrative denouement and gameplay of Irrational Game’s retro-futuristic dystopia. In outlining findings from this theses’ research, this chapter picks up on van den Berg’s assertions that late capitalist ideologies are infused within the mechanics of BioShock (Irrational Games, 2007) (and, as will be shown here, many AAA titles), before questioning how these ideologically capitalist mechanics of accumulation seductively act to motivate the player.

Dystopian and post-apocalyptic narratives have become de rigour in recent decades, not only within video games, but also broader media and visual arts. Dystopias shine light on anxieties of the day, are a way to ‘exorcise’ our own ‘ghosts’ (Gallardo, 2013: 39) and have been produced by the ‘terrors of the twentieth century’ (Moylan, 2000: xi). A dystopian structure of feeling has emerged since the late 80s; ‘anxieties about the catastrophe-to-come, fears of civilizational collapse and panicked ruminations that the literal end of human history is near pervade civil society and the media’ (Mirrlees, 2015: 7). Alice Ferreira (2013) names the present as ‘dystopian times’, in which prophecies of doom and destruction are ubiquitous in many forms of media, expressing our anxieties about the ecological, economic, and social future of humanity and earth (49).
Classic dystopias are recognised as generally being ‘uncritical’ in their following of a tripartite structure: the protagonist (usually a white man) lives within a dystopian society from which they ‘awaken’, they then go on the run and are eventually assimilated or destroyed (Moylan, 2000). In the late eighties and early nineties, a new form of dystopian narrative emerged which Tom Moylan (2000) termed ‘critical dystopia’. It departs from the tripartite structure, has a broader demographic of protagonist, and envisages an ending in which the result is neither death nor assimilation, but perhaps escape or change. In many ways the AAA games studied here are critical dystopias (at least narratively); containing criticisms of the state (e.g. The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), powerful global corporations (e.g. Deus Ex: Human Revolution, Eidos Montreal, 2011), the divide between rich and poor (e.g. Dishonored, Arcane Studios, 2012), and religious fundamentalism (e.g. BioShock Infinite, Irrational Games, 2012). However, as I later explore, these overt criticisms within the narrative rarely translate to mechanics which eschew capitalist and neoliberal principles. Fredric Jameson asserted in 1998 (a quote often misattributed to Slavoj Žižek) that ‘it seems easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; and perhaps that is due to some weakness in our imaginations’ (50). As I go on to demonstrate: in many of these games, the world has ended, but the neoliberal late-capitalist logic of accumulation stands fast.

Humour, Parody, Anxiety

The AAA games played as part of this study often contained instances of humour, parody and dystopia to express anxieties surrounding late-capitalism, inequality, state power and global corporations. For instance, reading a summary of the narrative of Grand Theft Auto V (Rockstar North, 2010) one could be forgiven for believing the game revelled in the accumulation of money. And certainly, from one perspective, it does – from jewellery heists to buying mansions, airfields, tuxedos, prostitutes, and customisable vehicle upgrades. But through playing the game and getting a full sense of the presentation of such events, the player may come to notice the humour and irony with which such actions are undertaken:

Go to college. Then you get to rip people off and get paid for it. It's called
capitalism.

(Michael, *Grand Theft Auto V*, Rockstar North, 2013)

I wouldn't be the first man to throw morals out the window for a pay check.

(Trevor, *Grand Theft Auto V*, Rockstar North, 2013)

I’m rich enough to do whatever the fuck I want and you’re poor enough not to ask me any Goddamn stupid questions. [...] I’m a Darwinist brother, alright. Some prosper, and some struggle.

(Devin, *Grand Theft Auto V*, Rockstar North, 2013)

The characters in *Grand Theft Auto V* are all striving for the same thing – wealth and power. What sets apart the playable characters (such as Michael) from the antagonist NPCs (such as Devin) is the player characters’ knowledge that they are playing the system. They see the flaw in themselves, others, and society, but whilst they may ‘play’ the system, they are also critical of it. In the way they both recognise and discuss the corruption of the system, the playable characters in *Grand Theft Auto V* present both an explicit critique and an endorsement of capitalist accumulation to the player, highlighting in their struggles and plans the worst recesses of the ideology.

Many of the other AAA games played also contained (within the narrative) criticisms of self-interested and extreme consumption. *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2012) serves as an example of how this anxiety is present in game narratives. The story is set in a racist alternative 1930s society in which the cult of the Founding Fathers of America is institutionalised within an unequal dictatorship under The Prophet. Industrialist Jeremiah Fink employs propaganda and a heavy hand in order to maintain and control the in-work poor:

What is the most admirable creature on God’s green Earth? Why it’s the bee! Have you ever seen a bee on vacation? Have you ever seen a bee take a sick day? Well, my friends, the answer is no! So I say, be… the bee! Be the bee! [...] Not happy with your pay? Well, be a good cheer. History tells us the painter Seurat would take no money for his art! Why, George Washington would only accept the presidency if he were paid a single dollar a year! So, don’t let money come between you and your craft.

(Jeremiah Fink, *BioShock Infinite*, Irrational Games, 2012)
During the game, the player witnesses the underclass of impoverished labourers (the ‘Vox Populi’) as they bid at a work auction, undercutting each other for the opportunity to perform dangerous and menial tasks for a pittance (fig. 5.1).

The world is presented to the player as capitalism with no conscience – where the gap between rich and poor is distinctly and openly drawn along the lines of race and class, and brought to the attention of the player through the forced witnessing of such scenes.

The criticisms of capitalism in the AAA games studied here are often co-morbid with a dystopian narrative setting. These dystopian gameworlds may be post-apocalyptic, such as the zombie-ridden backdrop of *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) in which humans have turned on each other (sometimes cannibalistically) in the fight for survival. Or they may be on the terrain of the biodystopian, such as *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal, 2011), in which powerful and wealthy heads of corporations form an illuminati, pulling the strings from the shadows, and where the vast divide between rich and poor determines those who can afford to be cybernetically ‘augmented’ (that which makes the characters – including the player character – increasingly physically powerful):
Corporations have more power than the government. Everyone’s fighting for power. For control. […] All the hate, all the violence, all the lies, all of it has a source, and they’re tearing this world apart. They control everything, even our minds, and I have to stop them.

(Jenson, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, Eidos Montreal, 2011)

Like *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, many AAA games fall into the category of ‘biodystopia’ (coined by Ferreira 2013: 49) by anxiously addressing misuse of technology, biotechnology, and man-made environmental disasters. *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* has a strong current of anxiety about (state and corporate) surveillance running through it. The player attempts to sneak past, incapacitate or kill the increasingly present guard patrols, whilst also avoiding, hacking or destroying the turrets and security cameras on each level. The narrative backgrounds and game elements create an aura of anxiety, instability and fear which lends itself well to the game form; violence can be utilised in the player’s need to negotiate and overcome these settings.

From one perspective, these game’s treatment of issues such as surveillance, inequality and rampant capitalism is handled in a ‘critical’ manner. That is, the issues and consequences of such issues are negatively presented to the player. The issues the player faces are often presented as being caused by such issues. For instance, in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal, 2011), Jenson’s injuries and the kidnapping of his ex-partner are revealed to be a plot by the illuminati – made up of powerful individuals seeking to secretly control society and evolve humans through biotechnology. These themes are utilised in a critical manner – the players attention is drawn to them, and the villains of the games (whether individuals or groups) usually thematically occupy a late-capitalist position. As such, they can evoke certain affective responses. As I go on to show, however, these themes within the narrative – and the affective responses they provoke – do not negate the presence of the very same themes within the core mechanics of the game.

*Affective Responses to Critical Narratives*

Examining my immersive research journal entries, it became clear that I experienced an affective, motivational response to game narratives which contained critical themes
and expressed anxieties about late-capitalist ideology, rampant consumption, biotechnology, and surveillance. The men (and occasionally women) who represented the capitalist, controlling, powerful strata of society, and on whom the player character’s initial trauma is attributed, aroused feelings of anger within me. As I played I came to feel a desire for revenge:

The men who pull the strings in this game[world] – Bill Taggart [an anti-biotechnology member of the Illuninami], David Sarif [a wealthy biotechnology industrialist], and Hugh Darrow [Nobel prizewinning biotech scientist] – they made me want to fight against both powerful people and the institutions which control society, technological innovation, political institutions, international media etc. Although the game gave me the chance to agree with them, I felt like it was pushing me to question them – through making visible their means of control, through having radio announcers who undermine them sarcastically, and through seeing what damage their influence can do (i.e. Sarif [forcibly] rebuilding [the player character], or [Darrow’s] creation of the ‘zombies’ [mechanically augmented people whose biotechnological implants have been tampered with to make them insane and violent]). [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: Deus Ex: Human Revolution)

As I highlight in this journal extract, whilst the game did give me the opportunity to benefit from the same themes it presented as being problematic (biotechnological innovation and so forth), the manner of its presentation was critical in that it highlighted certain issues such as corporate and political manipulation of mainstream media. Interestingly, I not only felt compelled to fight against the governments and industrialists who caused both my character’s initial trauma and the gameworld’s descent into dystopia, but also I carried this affective response through into my daily life – reflecting on the institutions in the United Kingdom which survey behaviour, sway public thinking, and encourage consumption:

I found that heavy handed and obvious use of propaganda within the game made me more likely to question institutions outside of the game also (the government, companies, the news, and so on). I became even more cynical when not immersed in the [dystopian] gameworld than before undertaking the research. [emphasis added]
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(Immersive Research Journal: *BioShock Infinite*)

There are clear parallels, therefore, between the initial trauma discussed in the previous chapter and this anxiety presented in the gameworld about capitalist consumption and biotechnology. Both act affectively and seductively, and work to motivate and attach the player to themes of revenge as well as the narrative outcome. However, despite the narrative setting of these games being one which contains anxieties about biotechnologies and late capitalist systems and ideologies, these same ideologies – about the development of human evolution, accumulation of wealth, status, and power – are firmly embedded in the game mechanics. I now turn to examining these mechanics before questioning how the embedded values are working at cross purposes with stated narrative values. I argue that the logic of accumulation common to AAA games acts motivationally and seductively, and has the potential to create certain affects and desires in the player.

**Accumulation in the Game Mechanics**

You’ll need to raise the fortune to pay for the army we’ll need.

*(Walter, *Fable III*, Lionhead Studios, 2010)*

Common to every AAA title played as part of this study is the imperative to accumulate in order to succeed. This imperative to accumulate, I argue, is distinctly neoliberal in how it encourages the player to view both themselves and their player character as a project on which they must work. As I go on to demonstrate, the mechanics operate through a mode of disciplinary power which places the player in the position of surveyor and surveyed. In this section, I outline the forms that this accumulation takes, how it not only benefits the player but is also a requirement of successful gameplay, and thus how it can be seen as a core gaming mechanic. To do so, data collected via qualitative content analysis is presented and discussed. Following on from this, the seductive and affective elements of this accumulation is explored though drawing on entries from my immersive research journal. Accumulation in the gamespace of the AAA games analysed took many forms. In this section I map the types of accumulated capital into two broad groups and briefly outline how they have an impact on gameplay. Firstly, the forms of in-game capital which the player accumulates. These forms of in-
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game capital endow the player and their character, enabling them to achieve success within the gameworld. Within this group there are some forms of in-game capital which do not have a direct impact on the ease of gameplay (as in, they do not contribute to the success of the player). Rather, these forms of in-game capital make play more pleasurable by providing more options for appearance or other customisation. The second form of capital exists within the metagame. It functions as a form of social capital between players. Both forms of accumulated capital can have an impact upon each other. They can overlap as the accumulation of one form of in-game capital can also lead the accruing of metagame capital.

In-Game Capital

This chapter is primarily interested in the function of forms of in-game capital which specifically make the player/player character more effective at tasks necessary for success in the game (such as combat, persuasion and so forth). The types of capital which function in this manner are experience points, character abilities, useful items, and money. In this section, I briefly parse these groups in order to demonstrate how they function to endow the player, as well as highlighting how they are tracked by the game, thus encouraging the player to focus on their collection.

Experience points (or XP), are a unit of measurement; in-game points awarded to the player character for specific in-game actions. What these actions involve varies from game to game, but they are usually awarded for acts such as killing an enemy or completing a mission. As XP is required to level up the player character, and to ‘level up’ is to progress the player character to the next stage, then XP usually functions to increase the attributes of the player character as well as creating possibilities to use new abilities and upgrade existing ones. Levelling up is typically enabled by reaching a certain number of experience points, and thus the accumulation of XP usually results in giving the player greater access to a range of abilities as well as making the player character stronger and tougher. In games which contain character progression and development, therefore, accumulating XP becomes a necessary and important activity. Games bring the accruing of XP to the attention of the player in various, obvious ways. They may have a fillable bar on the menu screen (often explicitly stating the amount of XP needed to reach the next level). They may call the player’s attention to the accumulation of XP through pop ups after every kill; alerting
the player to their increasing XP and their character’s proximity to levelling up. In making obvious the means to develop the player character, such game mechanics reinforce the necessity of the task of accumulation.

When the player has accrued enough XP to level, many AAA games (especially those belonging to the role-playing genre) allow new or stronger abilities to be ‘unlocked’ or ‘purchased’ for use in the gameworld (fig 5.2).

![Figure 5.2](image)
Purchasing abilities in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal, 2011)

As well as giving the player a greater range of options during combat or when travelling through the gameworld, abilities can function to make the player character harder to kill and enemies easier to kill. As they can often be most effectively used in specific combinations, and as it is often not possible during one playthrough to unlock or purchase them all, it is usually necessary for players to carefully consider their player character’s progression through the levels. The player may consider purchasing the abilities which enable them to engage in their preferred form of combat, or which allow them to bypass lethal combat all together. The specific abilities the player chooses to unlock can significantly alter their experience of the game, opening some options and paths, but closing off others. As such, the necessity for planning when purchasing abilities, like XP, encourages the player to survey and critique their player character, considering their weaknesses and strengths, as well as judging the most
effective ways to develop them into a preferred ‘build’. In giving the player choice about which items to use and how to upgrade them (fig. 5.3), and which abilities to purchase when developing their character, many of these forms of in-game capital allow for a personalisation of playstyle that encourages repeat plays.

The final forms of capital belonging to this group are useful items and money. Many AAA games have some form of currency system which can be used to purchase useful items and other forms of game capital (such as abilities). Money is usually found within the environments, on enemies and NPCs (see fig. 5.4), or given as a reward for completing missions or certain actions. Some AAA games have items whose only use value is to be sold for money, and likewise the only use for money may be to purchase useful items and new character abilities.

Useful items often take the form of weapons and armour for the player character and their allies, as well as weapon and armour upgrades. They can also include items which have a one off result, such as healing potions, and are usually managed via inventories (fig. 5.5). Like XP and abilities, these useful items typically result in

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3 The ‘build’ of a character refers to the specific attributes the player has developed/invested in/purchased, leading to their specific strengths and weaknesses. Having an optimal build for a chosen playstyle can greatly increase the ease of combat and gameplay, whilst a poorly built character can make combat and gameplay more difficult.
making the player character harder to kill, making enemies easier to kill, or giving the player access to a greater range of combat options. Whether ‘looted’ from the corpses of defeated enemies, or found in chests, both money and useful items have to be earned by the player. The distribution of these items and monies around the game map means that the player must explore in order to find these forms of game capital. They must invest significant time and effort into hunting.

Figure 5.4
Looting corpses in Dishonored (Arcane Studios, 2012)

Figure 5.5
Inventory in The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011)
In some games (particularly survival horror genres), these useful items are limited according to difficulty setting in order to make combat increasingly challenging. This then forces the player to consider and develop play strategies. For example, in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), useful items often have more than one purpose. Alcohol, for instance, is used to make both health kits and Molotov cocktails. On the hardest difficulties, ingredients are scarce and players must carefully consider their needs and approach to combat (fig. 5.6). As such, the importance of accumulation is even more present, due to the scarcity of resources, and attention paid to exploring the map is more closely linked to success than when playing on an easier setting.

![Crafting in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013)](image)

Clearly, there is a close relationship between these various forms of in-game capital—money, useful items, XP, and abilities. As they are accumulated, they function to make the player character stronger, more resilient, and have a greater variety of options for progression and success. As such, this accumulation is a core gameplay mechanic, integral to success:

The fact that the best equipment in the game is, unusually, *bought from shops and not found in the environment* meant that *I spent a lot of time collecting* all the items in each map to sell in order that I could kit out my character and his team with the *best gear*. [emphasis added]
The time and energy invested by the player can be significant in games which utilise this gameplay mechanic. Repetitive action and exploration rewards the player with greater options and a stronger character (better able to face the challenges of the game). This calling-to-attention the necessary mechanism of accumulation and iterative mode of engagement makes this gameplay mechanic important to consider when analysing AAA games. In the second half of this chapter I reflect further on how this mode of engagement between the player, their player character, and the gameworld, positions the player and encourages them to invest in certain activities (that may have social, gendered, raced or classed resonances).

Thus it is clear that these four modes of accumulation act as a type of game ‘capital’ in that they function to endow the player with more choice within the combat and narrative, make the player harder to kill or enemies easier to kill, and as such aid the player to beat the game. The remaining two modes of accumulation could be said to be metagame capital in that they cross from actions within the game and become part of the metagame.

**Metagame Capital**

The second group of forms of capital primarily exist within the metagame. Usually, they have little to no impact on gameplay itself. Rather, they concern the tracking (and sometimes rewarding) of player performance. Within this group I distinguish between ‘statistics’ (or ‘stats’) and ‘points’. Stats numerically track the player’s repeated performance of certain in-game actions. The acts tracked can vary widely, from the total number of kills (fig. 5.7), to the percentage of those kills which were ‘headshots’, to total amount of money spent, to the number of times a particular item has been used. Usually these tracked stats have no in-game reward, but they are closely linked with, and in some ways overlap with, the accumulation of points.
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Points are awarded for completing specific tasks or performing certain actions. PlayStation ‘trophies’ and Xbox ‘achievements’ fall into this category. Achievements are part of the metagame whereby accumulated points are made public and displayed as part of players’ IDs as ‘Gamerscore’ (Xbox) and ‘Trophy levels’ (PlayStation). They are worth points which amass, and the number of points per game is set (fig. 5.8).
Achievements and trophies are awarded for performing particular, set actions – from discovering a hidden ‘Easter egg’\(^4\) to completing the game. Many achievements reward in-game accumulation of various kinds: amassing X amount of money; spending X amount of money; killing X number of enemies (fig. 5.9), using a particular weapon X times and so on. Collecting achievements and trophies is so popular that many new releases are preceded by a ‘sneak peek’ at the achievements/trophies that each game will offer. Numerous online guides exist containing detailed walkthroughs\(^5\) on how to unlock every achievement/trophy. There is even a style of gaming – achievement hunting – in which the accumulation of Gamerscore and Trophy levels is the focus; to the extent that games are sometimes purchased based on their relative ease of achievement or trophy unlocking and point accumulation.

In his exploration of Xbox 360 achievements, Mikael Jakobsson (2011) concludes that they not only function as a system of rewards, but more importantly, as an MMO (massively multiplayer online game) in their own right. The accumulated points are presented to other players as a mark of one’s effort and success. As such,

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\(^4\) An Easter egg is an inside joke or intertextual reference, intentionally placed (and often hidden) in the gameworld.

\(^5\) As mentioned in chapter three, a ‘walkthrough’ is a strategy guide that ‘walks’ the player through the game, usually giving details such as enemy tactics, solutions for puzzles, locations of collectibles and so forth.
this metagame capital can be considered a form of social capital. Jakobsson mentions social capital briefly when referring to how the gamertag (and the gaming history of the player it conveys) is a component of gamer identity, and is thus ‘more meaningful to the player than just the points it consists of’ (n. pag.). This link can be made more explicitly by underlining the performance of identity occurring through the accruing of this metagame capital. The ability to display one’s achievements via a public profile can be considered as part of the performance of play and playing identity. The player must work on their skills, as well as develop the player character’s effectiveness according to the gameplay of the specific game being played.

Unlike the in-game forms of capital which comprise the first group discussed, these accumulate and tracked statistics and points provide feedback on the player and their character’s progress. They allow the player to critique their skills (and failures) as a player. The player turns their critical gaze upon themselves, forcing them to confront their abilities and weaknesses. For instance, when I look at figure 5.7 on page 156, in which my stats for one of my playthroughs for The Last of Us (Naughty Dog, 2013) are displayed, I feel embarrassed by the 72% accuracy rating. I am aware that as a player I prefer stealth over direct combat; I try as much as possible to not ‘aggro’ enemies, and as such have had less practice with shooting mechanics (especially on the PlayStation 3). Nevertheless, the tracking and making evident of my ability to only find my target two shots out of three causes me to reflect on my playing abilities, increasing my desire to improve this skill. This need to ‘do better’ is stronger when considering points as they exist in the social realm in the way they are displayed to other players online. As I go on to demonstrate later in this chapter, this metagame capital, in its function as an MMO (Jakobsson, 2011) and a site of identity performance, feeds into a larger neoliberal, critical viewing of the self and the player character as projects to be worked on.

Accumulation of the forms of in-game capital discussed in this chapter therefore act to make combat easier by either furnishing the player with a greater array of approaches to combat, or by making the player character stronger and tougher. Not only do they endow the player character with greater power and give the player more options when approaching gameplay. They can also make gameplay more interesting through their ability to furnish the player with more choice and an array of different 

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6 To ‘aggro’ an enemy is to alert them from a passive state into a more active form of combat.
styles. They encourage the player to ‘work’ on their character by repeatedly calling the player’s attention (via menus, fillable bars and pop up notifications – as I explore in the next section) to their character’s abilities and current level. Through seeding the items and monies needed for success throughout the map, they force the player to work on their accumulation – they must invest time and energy before they are rewarded with a more varied, powerful, and individualised player character. They are a necessary component of success, and the player cannot overcome their vulnerability (chapter four) without investing in these forms of in-game capital. Metagame capital, however, functions to draw attention to the player’s abilities themselves – highlighting and rewarding their actions and accomplishments. In so doing, it functions to accrue social capital to the player by enabling their performance of a ‘skillful gamer’. In the next section I highlight more explicitly the ways in which these forms of capital are brought to the player’s attention.

**Making Accumulation Matter**

In the AAA games analysed as part of this study, the accumulation of this in-game capital is not only a key component of gameplay, but it is tracked and promoted as a core gameplay mechanic. The totals of these forms of capital are made obvious to the player in various ways, and they are encouraged to actively engage in seeking them out. This tracking may take the form of running totals on the heads-up display (hereafter HUD)\(^7\), or it may be listed as a total on the start menu or in the inventory – visible each time the player pauses the game or stops to organise their items. In many games, the player’s accumulation of these forms of capital is made obvious to the player. For instance, in *Fable III* (Lionhead Studios, 2010), money is found in the environment, given as a reward for completing quests, and looted from corpses. This money can be used in the buying and selling of useful items. If the player has spent XP to purchase stacking abilities titled the ‘landlord’ and the ‘entrepreneur’, money can then be used to purchase houses and shops respectively – both in the gameworld and from an interactive map (fig. 5.10).

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\(^7\) A heads-up display (or HUD) is an overlay of data (such as a map, health statistics, ammunition counter and so forth) on the screen.
Incentivising Accumulation

Figure 5.10
Buying, renting and selling properties in *Fable III* (Lionhead Studios, 2010)

For every five minutes that the game is running, these owned shops automatically generate income. Likewise, houses can be rented out for profit, provided the player maintains a state of repair. The player can choose to set the rent at percentages of 0, 25, 50, 75, and 100. Each percentage has a moral equivalent ranging from ‘low’ (good) to ‘very high’ (bad). Low rents make the player character more moral and beloved by NPCs, high rents are immoral and result in the player character being hated. Indeed, as is explored in the next chapter, the accumulated moral capital from these actions (either good or bad as long as the moral ‘direction’ is consistent) is also a form of in-game capital which can provide options and bonuses for the player. Each time the player’s money accumulates, a bar pops up on screen to alert them to their increasing or decreasing gold. This gold is also visualised in a room in the player’s ‘sanctuary’ whereby the size of the pile is relative to the player’s accumulated wealth (fig. 5.11).

The accumulation of money in *Fable III*, therefore is a key narrative and mechanic device; one which the player is constantly made aware of, specifically their relation to, and progress in, the goal of accumulation of monies.
Incentivising Accumulation

Not only are the running totals of game capital highlighted for the player via the HUD, as part of the start menu, and in the game’s inventory, but many AAA titles also direct the player to in-game capital in overt ways, such as the use of visual cues directing the player to investigate areas or objects containing ‘loot’. For example, in *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013) the player can trigger Lara Croft’s ‘survivor sight’ (fig 5.12), which draws the player’s attention to objects such as chests containing forms of in-game capital (ammunition, weapon parts, salvage, and so on). In many games, the ability to ‘see’, sense, or highlight nearby useful objects and other forms of in-game capital is also common (i.e. outlined in yellow in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* [Eidos Montreal, 2011], flashing in *The Last of Us* [Naughty Dog, 2013], sparkling in *Dragon Age: Origins* [BioWare, 2009], and ‘dark vision’ in *Dishonored* [Arcane Studios, 2012]). This mechanic works in the same way as dynamic lighting where subtle cues lead the player towards the goal, ensuring they remain on-track and do not get lost. The highlighting of interactive objects containing loot and other forms of game capital serves to direct the player to interact with, and thus accumulate, that capital.

This accumulation is usually not only made a necessary component of gameplay in that it is required to beat the game, but it is so tightly woven into the mechanics of the game that *in playing, one accumulates*. It is made an unavoidable part of gameplay in much the same way as violence has been recognised as core mechanic of AAA
Incentivising Accumulation

Gaming (Gibson, 2015: 86). Accumulating capital endows the player with greater abilities, powers and strengths such that their mastery of the gamespace becomes more absolute – they are harder to kill and have more deadly or varied combat options at their disposal.

Figure 5.12
‘Survivor sight’ in Tomb Raider (Crystal Dynamics, 2013)

Rather than operating as an optional element of the gameplay, this game capital is a necessary component of AAA games. Accumulation of some form of game capital is usually integral to the success and progression of play; whether that is picking up ammunition so to be able to fight effectively, or kill enemies for XP to level up the player character. As I explored in chapter four, the drive to master the game is created through various affective experiences with specific game mechanics and narrative features. I argued that traumatic spectacle and vulnerability in the gameplay produces a desire to overcome and master in the player. In this section, I extend this thinking by arguing that the drive to master in such games is bound together with an imperative to accumulate, and that it is often impossible to achieve the former without engaging in some ways with the latter. Accumulation as a mechanic has to be engaged with, invested in, and worked on in order to complete the game. Indeed, when discussing the augmentations (abilities gained through levelling up) in Deus Ex: Human Revolution (Eidos Montreal, 2012), Krzywinska and Brown (2015) assert that some players feel a ‘closer connection to augmentations than the character, since it is the
agency of the augmentations which they directly control and which have the most impact on the game’ (198). These forms of game capital not only necessarily endow the player, as they are the means through which the player is able to overcome, matter and master; they are also strong affective ties to the gameplay and the gameworld. This feeling of mattering and mastery, as I have already explored, is a central pleasure of gaming; one in which the imperative to accumulate is clearly bound up.

**Accumulation, Desire, and Mastery**

As explored in chapter four of this thesis, the spectacles of these AAA games (from both technological artistry and the utilisation of sublime imagery), coupled with initial themes of trauma and melodrama, and the identification of the player with the heroic/anti-heroic player character creates a desire to iteratively overcome the difficulties of the game and achieve mastery. The narrative and mechanical goal of the games is to overcome, matter, and master. The affective motivation to do so can come from both narrative tropes and mechanical features. When accumulation is not only a key gameplay mechanic, but the action by which other gameplay actions are enabled (i.e. collecting XP in order to level up and have access to restricted content or areas), then it needs to be considered alongside the desire it creates and the mastery it enables.

Jacques Lacan (1979 [1977]) maintained that when we desire, we are not really desiring the object of desire, but rather the object a – ‘what is missing in the field of experience’ (McGowan, 2015: 47). Object a is a perceived lack; that which causes the subject to desire. It is the obstacle to the object of desire. In its focus on loss and reclamation of lost objects, fantasy can convince us that we once possessed the object of desire. As I argued in chapter four, in focusing on the overcoming of trauma and the reclamation of agency, the AAA games studied here offer a fantasy to the player which revolves around the recovery of the lost object. Through positioning mastery and control as the lost object, these games encourage the reclamation of this lost object through the discussed mechanics of accumulation. It is prudent, therefore to consider the consequences of accumulation being the primary means to overcome lack and achieve mastery.

Sigmund Freud (1908) describes the ‘anal character’ as a neurotic person whose focus is on ‘having, saving and hoarding money and material things, as well as feelings, gestures, words, [and] energy’ (Fromm, 1976: 83). Stephen Ross (2004)
labels the anal character’s obsession with possession as ‘narcissistic’ (41). In his book *To Have or to Be* (1976), Frankfurt School psychoanalyst Erich Fromm distinguishes what he calls the ‘having mode of existence’ from the ‘being mode of existence’ (12). Identifying ownership of objects as status symbols, he terms them ‘ego builders […] an extension of power’ (ibid.: 73). Drawing on his clinical experience, Fromm argues that the socio-cultural conditions of the industrial age and its ‘great promise of unlimited progress’ have led to feelings of frustration, disappointment and a sense of inferiority. He links production and consumption with mastery over both the object (be it inanimate, animal or human) and over one’s self (as part of the aforementioned ego building). In gaming terms, accumulation of in-game capitals can be considered the mode of consumption which enables mastery of the object (the player character), and accumulation of metagame capitals make evident the mastery over one’s self (as a skilful player).

In the AAA games examined in this research, the victim-hero-survivor (as discussed in the previous chapter) triumphs due to their efforts to accumulate various forms of game capital. Fromm examines heroes from many mythic, historical and religious traditions, highlighting how they eschew property and ownership, leaving behind their families and possessions to embark on journeys and adventures. He says we admire them because of this – we, too, long to cast off our worldly possessions in pursuit of a ‘being’ mode of existence. This line of thinking does not fit comfortably with the heroes, antiheroes and player character archetypes examined in chapter four. In presenting the player character as a one who has been traumatised and must reclaim the lost object of their agency and power through the accumulation of wealth, knowledge, skills and other in-game capital, we could therefore argue that the player is therefore ‘anally’ interpellated – they are required to participate in the fantasy of agentic reclamation via the quest to ‘have’. This mode of fantasy operates seductively to attach and affect the player in various ways.

*Accumulation as a Seductive, Affective Mechanic*

Throughout the research process I recorded several entries which focused on the extensive time spent collecting in order to endow my player character and enhance my experience. The games’ tracking of statistics (completion percentages, number of kills,
amount of money found and so forth) served to motivate me to place a greater importance on getting ‘better’ stats instead of just playing through the game:

Dishonored really encouraged me to collect in that every mission is divided into areas [in that main missions are discrete; separated off from each other narratively, each occurring in their own map. As such the stats for each mission can be tracked and made evident]. At the end of every mission it tells me what I managed to find out of what was available (runes, bone charms, Sokolov paintings, coin etc.). This really encouraged me to collect things as I go and to search everywhere and perhaps also to utilise internet guides as well. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: Dishonored)

By making accumulation a tangible, quantifiable statistic, even if it was not made an explicit ‘goal’ of the game, I felt it was something I had to participate in or risk failure. I experienced anxiety about whether I had accumulated enough to be successful, get the ‘best’ ending, or not miss out on game content:

The planet scanning is monotonous work, but I found it very addictive. I didn’t want to just have enough to purchase the upgrades I had waiting, but I wanted to have plenty of reserves in case in the future in case the game progressed to a situation where I could still purchase upgrades but could no longer scan planets for resources. I also wondered whether the minerals I collected would be transferred somehow to ME3 [Mass Effect 3 – the next game in the series], thus I spent a long time finding the richest planets for resources and probing them until the bars were full (after the bar is full, however, the number can still climb). My drive to collect resources was tempered only by the fact that buying probes was expensive and I also wanted to purchase every item and upgrade and weapon in the game. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: Mass Effect 2)

This anxiety led me to spend countless hours participating in often mundane activities in order to accumulate this in-game capital. The monotonous activity for increasing game capital, such as the aforementioned planet scanning for resources in Mass Effect 2 (BioWare, 2010), also took the form of chopping wood for gold in Fable III (Lionhead Studios, 2010), and searching for collectibles to get one hundred percent
completion ratings in *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2010). Time spent on accumulation of in-game capital can be extensive, especially in games such as these with RPG elements due to their focus on character development, exploration, and expansive worlds. My journal entries reveal that the feelings which motivated me were primarily anxiety, curiosity, and desire. When I achieved a certain level (such as a one hundred percent completion rating or enough gold to make an achievement ‘pop’) I felt a strong sense of accomplishment, with attached feelings of pride, power, and competency. The time and effort I invested in both critiquing and building my player character (enabled through forms in-game capital), as well as reviewing and honing my skills as a player, were rewarded with in-game and metagame capital. By incentivising accumulation, the game made myself and my player character a project to be worked on. This structuring of critique, effort, and progression is, as I demonstrate in these journal articles, an affective process which encourages certain modes of engagement.

*Disrupting Accumulation and Mastery: ¾ Vulnerability*

My immersive research journal also specifically charted the relationship between accumulation, desire, feelings of control, and mastery when gaming in relation to a narrative and mechanical ‘twist’ I call ‘¾ vulnerability’. ¾ vulnerability describes a narrative pattern identified in several of the games played here in which, when the player is most of the way through the game, a dramatic twist serves to undermine their progress and once again render them (narratively and mechanically) vulnerable. This ¾ vulnerability can be considered a form of ‘rhetorical corruption’ (Reed, 2016) which works to create a higher level of anxiety. In the example below, the relationship between accumulation, desire and control was thrown starkly into the light due to the sudden change of enemy combat styles in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal, 2011). Throughout most of the game, enemy mechanics follow a standard stealth-game pattern – they patrol set routes and have three levels of arousal. They can be ‘alerted’ to the player in various ways and will then abandon their route in order to search. If the player enters one of their ‘cones of vision’ they are ‘aggroed’ and become hostile, usually utilising ranged weaponry to attack. If the player hides effectively, the enemies enter a cool down period, eventually returning to their neutral, patrolling state. However, towards the end of the game, enemy patterns of behaviour suddenly change
and, once aggroed, they give chase and engage in frantic, chaotic, melee (close-quarters) combat. Whilst mechanically this shift may not appear at first very dramatic, the character which I had honed to be a highly effective and stealthy killing machine against the original type of enemy was rendered less useful against the new one. I not only felt as though I had been cheated by the game, but that I was no longer in control of the enemies as I could no longer predict or manipulate them:

In the final levels of the game, the gameplay shifts significantly and the style of enemy combat which I’ve been used to and in reaction to which I’ve been honing my skill changes completely. No longer do the hostile enemies employ ranged combat mechanics, but these new enemies have a melee ‘zombie’ style of combat where they rush at you in a direct line. This requires me to develop a completely new style of play meaning that a lot of the skills into which I invested time and praxis points [like XP] are less useful and I have to think more about what actions to take rather than rely on the intuition I built up over thirty hours of gameplay. I found this frustrating. I also found the levels with these enemies very frightening as I couldn’t control their movements so easily, even if I could predict them. If they spotted me they would chase me, making hiding and becoming ‘invisible’ to them much more difficult than it had been before. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: Deus Ex: Human Revolution)

My annoyance stemmed predominantly from the apparent wasting of my time and effort in establishing a character who was very proficient at killing a specific kind of enemy. Just at the moment I had seemingly overcome my initial position of vulnerability, and just as I was becoming very proficient at manipulating and controlling enemies, the game presented me with a new barrier and I experienced the traumatic vulnerability all over again.

This method of ‘shifting the goalposts’ by introducing a new type of enemy, or taking away player abilities and weapons, is common to many of the AAA games played during this project. Although in Deus Ex: Human Revolution (Eidos Montreal: 2011) this takes the form of a change in enemy combat style, it also occurs in Tomb Raider (Crystal Dynamics, 2013) when the player character is stripped of their accumulated weaponry, leaving them with only a bow and arrow. At roughly the same point in The Last of Us (Naughty Dog, 2012) the main player character, Joel, is injured and the player has to play as the mechanically weaker fourteen year old Ellie, armed
only with a bow and arrow. Other games narratively take a dark turn, such as the player character’s home being invaded and NPCs being killed or kidnapped (i.e. Mass Effect 2 [BioWare, 2010]), the game may suddenly send the player to a scarier, more dangerous location (i.e. Dishonored [Arcane Studios, 2012]), or it may introduce a new, more frightening, enemy (i.e. Fable III [Lionhead Studios, 2010]). They are often both narrative and mechanical in nature, and introduce a new sense of vulnerability just as the player is establishing their abilities, accumulating their capital, strengthening their control, and growing closer to the desired ‘mastery’. They disrupt the flow of accumulation and serve to underscore the player character as at risk. This vulnerability can shed light on the relationship between desire, accumulation and mastery in gaming in the way it highlights how the loss of abilities and control, which were developed through careful and painstaking accumulation over several hours, creates feelings of exposure and risk.

Neoliberal Technologies of the Self

This chapter has tracked the accumulative mechanics of the game and considered the way desire is embedded there, even as the narrative may appear to critique and reject those values. This concluding theoretical section draws on theories about power, domination and the subject by Michel Foucault (set up in chapter two), in order to theorise the relationship between accumulation and forms of game capital through understanding them as acting as technologies of the self. Both my approach to this issue and my conceptual consideration is similar to Maria Bakardjieva and Georgia Gaden (2012) who ‘employ the evocative concept of “technologies of the self” as an object to think with, even if sometimes against or beside the grain of Foucault’s work’ (400). In so doing they are able to get critical insight into the genealogy of Web 2.0 and how it can be seen to facilitate self-constitution. Adopting a similar mode of engagement with Foucault’s work thus allows me to gain critical purchase on how these mechanics could be said to function when considered from the perspective of the player as a playing subject.

As touched on in the last chapter, bound up in this quest for mastery is a requirement to not only master the gamespace, but also to master the player character and the player themselves by developing their gamer habitus (Kirkpatrick, 2012) in the form of internalising the controls. There is, then, a need for several layers of control,
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single-player (excluding scant online components or additional multiplayer features), they are not seen by other players – there is no ‘locus of multiple exchanges [only] separated individualities’ (Foucault, 1995 [1975]: 201). The panoptic qualities of games which allow the surveillance of players by other players is recognised and explored in Tom van Nuenen’s (2016) paper ‘Playing the Panopticon: Procedural Surveillance in Dark Souls’. Van Nuenen considers how mechanics such as the appearance of other players’ ‘ghosts’ and the invasion of others’ gameworlds create ‘anxieties of visibility [whilst also enabling] playful self-exposure’ (523). Yet, these panoptic qualities of surveillance can persist without reference to other people due to games’ ability to place the player concurrently in the position of supervisor and prisoner; observer and observed. Thus, players act as both the subject and object of disciplinary power.

In addition to the ‘work’ which the player performs on their character, they must (as previously mentioned) work on their skills as a player. In order to accumulate the necessary capital, the player must invest time and effort on developing the correct gamer habitus. As the game may track potentially poor stats or failures (such as accuracy ratings and player deaths – see figure 5.7 on page 156), the player is encouraged to consider their abilities and skills and work to develop them. In this way, the accumulating, self-improving and investing player can be thought of as occupying a neoliberal subject position. As Deborah Tudor (2011) notes, the individual as the sole bearer of responsibility for their own success and welfare is a key component of neoliberal culture – a culture which is problematically gendered and raced (as I discuss later).

Neoliberal culture expresses itself through a philosophy that rests upon transference of authority from ‘official’ (government) sources to private experts in fields ranging from psychology (self-help) to fashion, weight-loss, and career planning. This shift also occurs through media presenting ‘information, evaluation, and reproach’ aimed at solidifying a culture in which the individual bears sole responsibility for his or her own personal and professional welfare. In this process of shifting from individuals embedded in social class to untethered self-disciplined individuals, neoliberalism revoked but also reinvigorated white patriarchy—a feature that is also played out in several contemporary media texts (Tudor, 2011: 59)
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In the need to not only survey, but discipline and build their character through the accumulation of in-game capital, I believe there is a strong current of neoliberal ideology operating through this game mechanic. The player knows that it is only through time consuming investment that success and mastery is achieved.

When playing, as I began to see the accumulation of capital as the core mechanism for success, I prioritised it within my choices and actions. This meant sometimes I resisted taking the ethical ‘line’ I may have preferred, or the gameplay option I was more drawn to. Instead, I performed actions which enabled faster, more effective accumulation of capital. This is poignant when viewing gaming through an ethical lens as it enables a consideration of how this tracking and rewarding of particular actions can impact on player’s choices and decision-making processes. I pick up on this thread in the next chapter. As demonstrated in the following immersive research journal entry, I experienced guilt when performing (what I perceived to be) immoral acts within the game in order to accumulate items, information, and XP. However, I also felt that the rewarding and tracking of these forms of game capital legitimated my actions:

You can hack various locks within the environment. Many are the doors to people’s apartments or offices, or are the locks on safes, or the screen locks on computers. If you are caught hacking these locks by the wrong person (i.e. the person whose house you’re breaking into or a security guard/police officer) then they will be alerted and tell you to stop. If you don’t they will become hostile and attack you. There is impetus for hacking these locks as each successful hack is rewarded with experience points. Therefore, even when I had no reason to enter someone’s office or home, I found myself breaking the lock in order to net XP. This action felt morally grey as later on (especially in Sarif industries) you heard of a spate of thefts which have occurred in the offices which you are the culprit of. I felt bad for breaking into people’s offices and reading their emails, but the journal updates, information, loot and XP made me feel more justified in performing this immoral act; almost as if the game condoned and encouraged it. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: Deus Ex: Human Revolution)
As the accumulation of forms of in-game capital is tracked, encouraged, and a necessary component of success, I believed participation was preferable to my favoured options and means of playing. I felt strongly compelled to participate in the style of play most efficient for building my character and thus increasing my chances for success.

Neoliberal accumulation and viewing the player character as a ‘project to be worked on’ (Skeggs, 2004b) can be problematised by utilising a classed lens. Beverley Skeggs (2004b) argues that the affects of the British white middle classes reflect the ethos of ‘possessive individualism’ in their commitment to self-improvement, deferred gratification and accruing more ‘property in the self’. This form of individualism, shown above to be a key component of neoliberal ideology and clearly present in the video game mechanics analysed in this project, is not universal. Lisa Adkins (2002 in Skeggs, 2004b) argues that the neoliberal self is male, and Skeggs (2004b) adds that he is also middle class. In this way video games which explicitly incentivise accumulation in order to advance as a core mechanic could be argued to reify middle class forms of individualism and subjectivity. Skeggs (2004a) ‘argues that what might appear to be the emergence of a new kind of “late modern” individual and affective subjectivity is in fact just the usual middle-classed self, and this theory once again rewrites the working class as deficit’ (Wetherell, 2012: 112). In the positioning of the player as both the subject and object of disciplinary power, and the way that AAA video games encourage neoliberal ‘work’ on the enterprising player character, the core game mechanics of accumulation have distinctly middle class resonances.

Conclusion

The games studied in this project contained both anxieties about, and criticisms of, capitalist accumulation, whilst also possessing a logic of accumulation within the core mechanics. In framing the game’s narrative within (bio)dystopian worlds, the player is affectively compelled to action within a critique of capitalist logics. They are positioned as victimised by capitalist structures and often must work to subvert those who have risen to power through the accumulation of wealth and power. At the same time, in quantifying, making evident, and rewarding the accruing of in-game capital, the mechanics of accumulation can be seen to be a key element of many AAA games. Moreover, by relying on (and narratively and mechanically stoking) the feelings of
vulnerability and desire to master in the player – the focus of chapter four – the mechanics of accumulation can be seen to be affective and seductive. These mechanics place the player in a position where they both survey their character and themselves as a project to be worked on. It is problematically neoliberal in its function. It underscores the notion that, only by rampantly accumulating and critiquing ourselves can we achieve success and overcome our vulnerability and lack such that we can matter and master.

In chapter four, I argued that the player’s identification with the player character was strengthened and directed by their viewing the player character as an ‘ego-ideal’ who, though initially traumatised and victimised, overcomes their ‘lack’ to achieve a position of mastery. As I have shown in this chapter, in order to do so the player must successfully, and time-consumingly, participate in the mechanics of accumulation. It is possible to view the player’s identification with their player character as stimulating desire for mastery, and their ability to overcome their initial vulnerability and ‘lack’ as serving to legitimate the neoliberal ideology of the self as a project.

The AAA games examined in this research often contained dystopian themes and anxiety about biotechnologies and late-capitalist ideologies. Whilst these games anxiously comment on the potential misuse and destructive capabilities of biotechnologies and mechanisms of accumulation, those same biotechnologies and mechanisms are usually utilised as a means of developing and strengthening the player character such that they can master the game. The narrative explanation for the mechanism of building the player character is often presented to the player as a process of accumulating capital which is invested in biotechnology, making their character stronger, smarter, faster and thus deadlier. These biotechnological advancements are a necessary element for completing the game; the player must invest in them in order to win. Yet, it can be seen to be acting at cross purpose to the anxiety with which both the themes of rampant late-capitalist accumulation and misuse of biotechnology are treated within the game narrative. It is significant that the narrative themes which initially traumatised the player character, and which are used to provoke anxiety and unease, are also the mechanical mechanisms that the player must utilise in order to succeed. It is only through harnessing that which initially traumatised them that the player and their player character are able to overcome their lack.

In their chapter ‘Games, Gamers and Posthumanism’, Tanya Krzywinska and Douglas Brown (2015) reveal a key contradiction between the presentation of
posthuman ideals and biotechnological augmentation, and the deeper, distinctly humanist agenda embedded within game mechanics. The player is the master of their destiny; like Da Vinci’s Vitruvian man, they ‘become an agent in an arc of progress’ (199). Recognising and analysing such contradictions between the narrative and ludic framing of video games – termed ludonarrative dissonance (Hocking, 2007, in Murphy, 2016) – can elevate games ‘criticism beyond a narrow focus on playability and help foster more diverse critical viewpoints [that] represent and simulate alternative states of political being’ (Murphy, 2016: 8). This chapter exposes another core contradiction through highlighting how the AAA games discussed here pit critical narratives against a game mechanic of capitalist accumulation. The tension between this narrative disavowal of capitalist logic and the necessary and unavoidable accumulation present within game mechanics is important to consider when looking at either side of this contradiction. Although the games studied in this research contain a pervasive logic of accumulation, they often have narrative settings which critique capitalist accumulation though overt condemnations of industrialists, governments and companies, and express capitalist anxieties due to their (bio)dystopian settings. I believe that the effect of this tension is to appear critical while deeply investing in the logics of the game’s mechanical focus – forcing the player to neoliberally survey both their and their character’s development. Thus, I argue that the critique is negated by this contradiction. The games allow the mechanics of accumulation and neo-liberal self-building to overcome the anxieties concerning the logics of capitalist accumulation.

The result of this contradiction for players may be that they embed a paradoxical set of affective investments in, on the one hand, a critique of capitalist logic and, on the other hand, capitalist and neoliberal world- and self-building. This chapter has shown that each is affectively seductive. It is desire that can suture these incompatibilities together, each impulse negating the other and yet also fuelling the other. In chapter six I further narrow the scope of this chapter’s discussion by drawing out and discussing one particularly interesting form of capital which can be accrued, tracked, and rewarded within the game – moral capital – and situate this process within the discussion of gaming as an ethical activity.
I’m starting to understand why the galaxy needs cold-hearted dictators now and then. [...] They don’t give a damn about the consequences. Suppose that’s what it’s going to take, Shepard, the ruthless calculus of war. Ten billion people over here die so twenty billion over there can live. Are we up for that? Are you?

(Garrus, *Mass Effect 3*, BioWare, 2012)

At first I felt very uncomfortable looting the human bodies of the clothes in their inventory as it would remove the clothes from the avatar's bodies and leave them in their underwear. After a while, however, I became accustomed to it and stopped being bothered. Indeed, I would use whether the body was naked or not as a marker of whether I'd already looted it!

(Immersive Research Journal: *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*)

You are beset by enemies. Little red dots on your heads-up display alert you to the fact that you are surrounded. They fly at you, their faces twisted by hate and rage. There is no pacifying them. Only one option remains. Equipping your deadliest weapon, you take them each out in turn, their heads exploding like melons under your fire. A scene that once may have made you squirm in disgust now leaves you feeling strangely powerful. You move through the doors and onto the final stage of the quest. The boss cowers in her office, her minions slain and her defences destroyed. Begging for her life, she offers you a deal – let her go and she will devote her life to some great cause. You consider it for a moment, before raising your weapon and killing her in cold blood. A small sensation of discomfort lies in your stomach, but you had to do it; your character had to do it. He is a hardened survivor – an angry and resentful vigilante in a nest of vipers. You know the game is tracking your decisions, weighing the ‘good’ against the ‘bad’. Consistency is the key to getting the ending you want.

The violent acts that are often an integral mechanic of AAA games have been much discussed by both the academy and the media over the past three decades. In exploring the relationship between the player and the game on an ethical terrain, this chapter seeks to consider how the structure of the game may be ethically negotiated by the player. Drawing on findings from this research’s qualitative content analysis,
this chapter discusses the mechanical and narrative avenues for ethical response to gameplay, the evocation of these responses, and how responses are structured and rewarded by the game. Then, through drawing on my immersive research journal entries, this chapter proposes that the player develops a moral habitus which allows them to buy into the internal ethical rules of the game and thus bypass negative emotions (such as guilt) which would otherwise act as a hindrance to achieving an immersive state.

**Theoretical Basis**

Briefly revisiting chapter one’s discussion, this chapter utilises the notion of ethical and moral acts. It differentiates between these terms by understanding ‘ethical’ as referring to those actions which particular philosophies, institutions, groups and societies may deem to have an ethical valence; that is, right or wrong, good or bad. The term ‘moral’, on the other hand, is used to denote a judgement of an act by an individual in relation to their own personal understanding of right and wrong. In this way what may be ethically thought of as ‘good’ by one society or ethical philosophy may not be thought of as morally ‘good’ by an individual and vice versa. Specifically in relation to this chapter’s discussions of in-game actions, ethical acts refers to those in-game actions that might be considered to have an ethical valence, such as violence, murder, stealing, cheating, lying, altruistic giving, selflessness, modesty, or saving someone’s life. Moral judgements as discussed in this chapter may refer to either the player’s reaction to in-game acts (whether the player believes an act to be right or wrong), or it may refer to the game’s system of judgement of these acts (whether the game rewards or chastises certain behaviours).

Rather than focus the attention of this research on questions of how violent gaming may alter the mental state and decision-making processes of players, this chapter explores what kind of ethical quandaries are presented to the player, how the player is expected to negotiate them, and how decision-making about ethical acts is undertaken in immersive gaming. I situate the ethics of games within an understanding of their operation as a rule-bound space. For instance, the mechanics of gameplay that reward or restrict certain ethical processes and decisions is examined. By exploring the affective component of ethical play and drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, this chapter demonstrates ethical decision-making in gaming is made
secondary to the enjoyment of successful and immersive play. I argue, thus, that the maintenance of an immersive state requires that the player negotiates, learns, and internalises the rule-based morality of the game. On one level this applies to the emotional, fast paced ethical acts that are often unnegotiable within the mechanics of the game (an example would be shooting enemies who are attacking the player). On another level, this negotiation and internalisation applies to the rational, cognitive ethical decisions the player is forced to make as part of the game narrative, occurring when games present the player with ethical problems. An example of such a decision would be deciding whether to kill or spare an enemy as the player sneaks up on them.

Interactivity, Immersion, and Morality

Much new research has emerged in recent years exploring themes along the lines of ethical decision-making in games, as some feel ‘the time seems ripe to pay more systematic attention to this topic’ (Hartmann, 2013: 125). The structures directing ethical decision-making, as well as the players’ decision-making process, both need to be understood vis-à-vis the interactivity of gameplay. All player engagements with the ethics of gaming are through and within game mechanics that act to simultaneously restrict the player’s actions whilst also giving a them measure of interactive agency. It is important to recognise the role of interactivity in this equation because previous research has shown that, when making decisions about how to act, players feel as if their player character’s action are also their actions (Tan, 1994). This sets gaming apart from other media whose interactivity operates in different ways, such as in film where the viewer’s involvement with characters is in part based upon the immersive investment in those characters and the narrative, without the viewer having the ability to influence the characters’ decisions or affect the story’s outcome. Video game players feel, as has been discussed in chapter one, that to a certain extent they ‘inhabit’ the player character (Hefner et al., 2007), and that this character is in some respects an extension of their self (Surman, 2007). This means an analysis of both the ethical decisions presented to the player within the game, as well as the ethical acts about which they have no say (i.e. often, kill a character or turn off the game being the only choices) must both be considered significant.

Previous explorations of ethics in gaming have taken many avenues of examination. Some, such as Marcus Schülzke (2009) in his article ‘Moral Decision
Making in Fallout’ have mapped out and assessed the various ethical options presented to the player. Schulzke takes Bethesda Game Studio’s dystopian retro-futuristic RPG *Fallout 3* (2009) as a case study in his exploration of morality in video games. He argues that, despite *Fallout 3* having a system of karma – where ‘good’ actions result in karma gain and ‘bad’ actions in karma loss – the game does not teach the player a particular morality; that is, there is no coherent system of morality (n. pag. [par. 32]). However, he concludes that the game can teach the player practical wisdom – that which Aristotle termed ‘phronesis’ and believed to be more valuable than theoretical knowledge of a system of morality (n. pag. [par. 32]). The ethical options examined in Schulzke’s article are at the rational and cognitive decision-making level. Many games presenting the player with such decisions operate along a binary of ethical judgement: good vs. evil; selfless vs. selfish; honourable vs. dishonourable; kind vs. cruel; peaceful vs. violent, and so forth. Whilst focusing on what players ‘take away’ from ethical encounters should be interrogated and understood, however, it is also necessary to recognise and understand the significance of these decisions as *in-game* acts.

*Dual-Systems Approach*

In his chapter ‘Moral disengagement during exposure to media violence: Would it feel right to shoot an innocent civilian in a videogame?’ (2013), Tilo Hartmann discusses a dual-systems approach to player reaction to violent or immoral acts within media. One response operates along the lines of a rational, cognitive reaction to witnessing such acts whereby the player has the time and space to consider how this act fits into their own ethical standpoint. The other response is faster paced and operates along emotional lines, such that the response is not cognitive but unconscious. Hartmann argues that video games often elicit responses to ethical stimuli along both lines, but especially the emotional/non-cognitive depending on the situation, as they are fast paced and leave little room for reflection moment to moment (2013). This is akin to the discussion in this thesis’ methodology chapter regarding the theoretical tensions between immersion and critical awareness (see pages 58-60). The emotional response Hartmann describes can be seen to be an immersive response – one which is automatic and unreflexive – whereas his description of the cognitive response has an implied critical reflection contained within it. However, like the tension between immersion and critical reflection discussed in chapter two, the boundary between these two
responses is not as clear cut as at first appears. In order to elicit the ethical response, the player must first be emotionally absorbed in certain layers of the media (be they narrative, character identification, mechanics, soundtrack, and so on). As demonstrated in chapter two's discussion of the three stages of immersion, this emotional absorption constitutes at least a low level of immersion (Brown & Cairns, 2004). Consequently, as with all immersive states, there is a willingness on the part of the immersant\(^1\) to enter into such. Therefore, although the experiential/emotional processing of ethical responses can be seen as unconscious, there is nevertheless an active component to this response in that the player’s level of immersion and engagement with the game can affect not only their rational processing of ethical acts, but also their emotional processing. It is necessary to understand how the player’s relationship to the game and their investment in it can alter their emotional processing of ethical responses – that is, after performing certain acts within the game, how do they feel about it? During the discussion section of this chapter, the notion of a dual-systems approach is returned to in my argument for the importance of recognising the player as an active immersant. This prompts a discussion of the role this plays in generating the player’s responses to ethical acts, especially considering how certain negative responses (such as guilt and disgust) can hinder or reduce immersion.

Taboo Mechanics and Player Guilt

Despite violent games being enjoyable to those who choose to play them, there are still moral limits to what most players are comfortable with witnessing and participating in (Hartmann, 2013: 120). As some of the most extreme and violent acts one can perpetrate in real life, these ‘taboos’ are lines which most players will not cross. Involvement in certain taboo acts such as massacre, torture and rape are seen as unacceptable to most, causing an outcry from both players and the general public when included as part of gameplay (Hartmann, 2013). It is necessary to ask, then, why are killing and other seemingly wrong acts so easily rationalised and negotiated to the point of not producing significant negative affects for the majority of players, when other (also violent and problematic) acts are seen as going too far, even in a virtual

\(^1\) As mentioned in chapter two, ‘immersant’ refers to the person who immerses themselves/is immersed in the medium.
world? Could it be something to do with the way such acts are presented to the player? Are we attuned to the generic expectations of committing murder in a virtual world, but not rape?

These moral taboos in the gamespace highlight how players have been shown to treat NPCs as distinct moral agents. Research shows that players may broadly perceive aggression towards these NPCs where their empathic response (influenced by anthropomorphism and/or dehumanisation) exists somewhere in between an aggressive act towards a real person and a rock (Kwan & Fiske, 2008, in Hartmann, 2013: 125). This clearly leaves a large gulf for the scope of individual players’ responses. As such, rather than it being a case of somehow forgetting that these characters are not real, the player relates to the NPCs such that they not only feel a measure of empathy for them, but also aversive responses such as guilt are elicited when undue harm is perpetrated by the player. The level of guilt felt is related to how the game presents the NPC – for example, if an enemy dies in a pained, wailing (more realistic) manner, the player feels a greater level of aversion than if they die in the more usual, pain-free mode that is common to most games (ibid.: 118). Tilo Hartmann, Ethan Toz and Marvin Brandon (2010) performed a study into player guilt at what they termed ‘unjustified’ virtual violence. They differentiated between justified and unjustified violence by considering its importance and necessity within the game, as opposed to any kind of moral justification. Hartmann et al. (2010) found that if an enemy or an NPC is less ‘fleshed out’ as a character, then the player will usually feel less guilty about killing them. This is an interesting finding considering that many games in recent years have introduced an element of humanising the enemies. A good example of this can be found in the game Dishonored (Arcane Studios, 2012) where the player overhears an enemy guard discussing his romantic hopes and dreams. The player is given the choice of sneaking past this enemy or killing him. This narrative feature is discussed in this chapter.

This guilt at killing ‘humanised’ enemies is presented in Hartmann’s (2010) paper as being irrational and that players feel – on some level – that the game is ‘real’, or at least they experience it as such. I argue, however, the guilt experienced is due to the player’s perception that their actions are wrong within the rules of that world. The ‘innocent’ NPC is innocent because of their non-aggression; thus, the game dictates that it is not right to shoot them. It may be possible, but it is not necessary. Hartmann proposes that players choose not to walk over a cliff in a video game because they feel
that a game is real whilst simultaneously knowing it is not (ibid.: 112). He uses this paradox to highlight the relationship between rational and experiential processing of virtual actions and decision-making. However, I propose players do not choose to walk over the cliff because it is contrary to the dictates of the game. Therefore, these actions are completely rational within the rules of the gameworld. As I go on to argue in the final section of this chapter, the player creates a habitus which gives them a ‘feel’ for these rules and thus allows them to succeed within the ‘field’ of that game. If there were no adverse effects from them walking over the cliff then they may well do so, as it is therefore ‘permissible’. For example, Coffee Stain Studio’s *Goat Simulator* (2015) is a sandbox game in which the player controls a goat rampaging around a city. The goal of the game is to do as much damage as possible. In so doing, the goat and those it charges into are flung around like ragdolls defying the laws of physics, yet they cannot be killed. The rules of *Goat Simulator* permit actions usually non-permissible in other games (such as walking off cliffs). Considering games in which killing or harming NPCs is not penalised (through gaining notoriety, NPCs shunning you, quests being closed off to you, or the police being sent against you) there may well be less player guilt in taking the option to shoot them. It is along these lines – where the rules of the game in some way contribute to shaping the players’ ethical responses and actions – that I go on to explore how guilt and ethical behaviour are negotiated vis-à-vis the rules of the gameworld.

Building on the ‘rules of the game’ argument for moral disengagement outlined in the literature review, this chapter takes forward the understanding that the player can rationalise their emotional response to violent acts perpetrated within the game. The question this chapter seeks to examine is: how does the player first come to know the moral rules of the game, and following that, how do they internalise those rules such that their responses to the ‘problematic’ ethical acts (integral to the game mechanics) are negotiated and mitigated in order that play be pleasurable and immersive? It is also important to question how this ‘learning the rules’ might operate affectively, despite it appearing at first glance to operate on a rational, cognitive level. This chapter therefore seeks to address how these rules are encountered and negotiated in immersive gaming.

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2 As mentioned in chapter three, a ‘sandbox’ is an open-ended game in which minimal restrictions are placed on the player. Usually there is a large amount of exploration and self-direction (as opposed to a linear narrative structure).
Habitus

In order to theorise and better understand how the rule-bound gamespace acts as an ethical field the player chooses to immerse themselves in, this chapter builds on the initial discussion of how players rationalise and respond to the virtual ethical acts they perpetrate when gaming. To extend this analysis, Bourdieu’s notion of habitus is deployed in order to theorise the relationship between gaming as both an ethical and an affective-immerse practise. Doing so allows further light to be shed on how players negotiate the various tensions within this relationship.

The immersive research journal entries I present throughout the discussion section of this chapter explore potential affective responses to certain elements of ethical gameplay – not only binary ethical choices but also the more general ethical experience of gaming. In examining these potential responses, I employ the notion of habitus to explain the negotiation between player and game system in their coproduction of (ethical) gameplay. In *Distinction* (2010 [1984]), Pierre Bourdieu describes habitus as a structure that is both structured and structuring. Acquired through everyday practises and experiences, habitus is ‘internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practises and meaning-giving perceptions’ (166). Where appropriate, habitus allows an individual to navigate certain situations successfully. Some (see Jenkins, 1991) have accused habitus of being vague, inexplicable, and unobservable – a theoretical ‘black box’. However, I follow Loïc Wacquant’s (2011) thinking that habitus is a useful tool, enabling us to ‘illuminate the variegated logics of social action [and] ground the distinctive virtues of deep immersion in and carnal entanglement with the object of ethnographic inquiry’ (82). Bourdieu’s thinking conceives of a subject who is predominantly created through structures, rather than agency. As such, his notion of habitus does not comfortably reside within this thesis’ conceptualisation of the subject as being somewhere in between; both structurally and agentfully created. Nevertheless, in this chapter I highlight the active, passive, embodied, and affective components of the creation of my game-specific moral habitus during the process of negotiating ethical gameplay structures. As with previous chapters, I do so through drawing on my immersive research journal entries.

As has already been mentioned in previous chapters, the notion of habitus to theorise certain gaming processes has already been deployed by Graeme Kirkpatrick
In order to become sufficiently comfortable and confident with the controls, and to thus be successful at a particular game, the player must ‘internalise’ those controls; gameplay has to become embodied and autonomic. In so doing, players develop their gamer habitus. Kirkpatrick (2012) asserts that the process of internalising a game’s control system can be understood as ‘a historically specific habitus’ (n. pag.). In presenting and discussing my immersive journal entries, I propose taking this assertion further by applying the notion of habitus to the player’s internalisation of a game’s moral rules necessarily occurring when they immerse themselves in a violent virtual world. This is not the first time that the notion of there being a ‘moral habitus’ has been discussed. However, when this concept has previously been deployed, it has usually been in relation to people’s learning and internalising of ‘real world’ moral rules, structuring their own ethical behaviour (e.g. Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013). Gabriel Ignatow (2009) argues that, by taking an embodied approach to cognition, researchers can deploy the notion of habitus to better understand how people make moral judgements. I follow his lead and seek to highlight the affective, embodied experience of developing a game specific moral habitus. In so doing, I argue ‘against Bourdieu’s separation of the cognitive and somatic elements of habitus’ (Ignatow, 2009: 110) in order to highlight the role of affect in moral reasoning.

**Ethical Gaming**

As with previous chapters, this chapter is based on a foundation of research methods qualitatively examining the content of various levels of the gaming experience (such as narrative and mechanics) whilst also exploring the game on an immersive terrain via an autoethnographic research journal. The following section explores and draws on data gathered via the first research method. Then, to compliment and extend this chapter’s analysis, I draw on my immersive journal entries to highlight various ethical issues and potential player responses. The body and content of the following discussion – in which the various avenues for response to ethical gameplay and the evocation of these responses (how they are rewarded and structured by the game) is mapped out – was informed to a greater extent by the qualitative content analysis. As such, drawing on examples from the qualitative content analysis research, the ethical content of gaming is first explored via the different modes of player agency. I explore the potential for play, resistance and negotiation with the moral rules present within
the game’s mechanics and narrative, before discussing how these responses are evoked, structured and rewarded.

There are two distinct levels of ethical acts perpetrated by players within games. Both of these levels of ethical interaction with the game have something to reveal about how the player negotiates their responses to these potentially ethically problematic acts. For these reasons, both need to be examined in order to build a more extensive model of how players affectively and immersively engage with games on an ethical terrain.

*Closed Ethical Design*

The first level of ethical interaction with the game is what Miguel Sicart (2009) terms ‘closed ethical design’ (213). Closed ethical design encompasses ethical acts which are presented as being non-negotiable within the rules of the gameworld. It is an ‘implicit system of morality’ imposed ‘from above’ (Švelch, 2010: 59) and refers to the moral rules the player must adhere to in order to progress through the game (i.e. I must shoot and kill the characters who attack me otherwise I will die and the game will end). This level primarily takes place within the mechanics of the game. The most obvious example of ethical acts operating at this level is the use of violence as a primary mechanic of gameplay – in many AAA games produced for adults, killing is common and unavoidable. Whilst advancing through the gamespace, the player is confronted by enemies and there are often few opportunities to bypass them. As such, the player is forced into a confrontation of kill or be killed.

Other ethical acts at this level are more subtle. As discussed in chapter five, the accumulation of in-game capital is often a necessary component of these games. The mechanical means by which the player collects these forms of capital often operates along this first level of ethical acts – either by killing enemies (for experience, loot, money and so on), or by taking them from containers (this could be considered stealing even if the game does not reward or chastise it as such). A good example of this level of unavoidable and non-negotiable ‘closed’ ethical interaction is in *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2012) when, after travelling to a parallel world and fighting alongside rebel leader Daisy Fitzroy and her Vox Populi, the once-friendly NPCs suddenly turn on the player character (Booker):

*Daisy:* ‘I saw you die, Booker. Saw it with my own eyes.’
Booker: ‘Fitzroy. Listen I got you your guns, I’m here for my airship.’

Daisy: ‘But my Booker DeWitt died for the Vox Populi. You [sic] either an imposter… or a ghost. My Booker DeWitt was a hero to the cause. A story to tell your children. You… You just complicate the narrative.’

(ibid.)

The player fights alongside Vox Populi NPCs, where, should the player character injure them, the game chastises with the words ‘Don’t damage your allies!’ appearing in the centre of the screen (fig. 6.1). Less than three minutes later, the player is forced into an unavoidable and deadly confrontation with these former allies.

![Figure 6.1](image)

‘Don’t damage your allies!’ – *BioShock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2012)

Many ethical acts operating at this level of closed ethical design, however, are not so jarring to the player. Indeed, reliance on moral disengagement cues (as discussed in chapter one) are common. They enable the player to participate in such unavoidable actions without negative affects or cognitive dissonance. For example, enemies do not only attack the player – forcing an engagement – but they are also represented as being ‘bad’ or ‘immoral’. They are usually visually highlighted by the colour red (on the map, their health bars, and so forth). These cues allow the player to rationalise their moral response: the enemies are bad; they are forcing me to engage them; killing them is therefore a moral action.
A more mundane example of this type of ethical interaction with a game is the primacy of the mechanic of violent interaction combined with the game’s denotation of killable vs. non-killable characters. For instance, in the *Mass Effect* series (2007) non-killable NPCs cannot be fired upon. If the player attempts to aim their weapon at an NPC, the player character – Commander Shepard – will point the barrel away. However, when encountering an enemy, their status as a killable character is not merely predicated on their being aggressive towards Shepard. Indeed, some of them are engaged in other activities until they are alerted to the player character’s presence. Rather, a red health bar at the top of the screen, a red triangle as an aiming prompt, and a red dot on the HUD map indicates their status as a character who should, or must, be killed (fig. 6.2).

*Figure 6.2*
Enemies in red in *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007)

*Open Ethical Design*

The second level of ethical interaction – ‘open ethical design’ (Sicart, 2009: 213) – describes instances where players are furnished with the agency to make ethical decisions which the game then dynamically reacts to. These decisions may or may not be made explicit within the mechanics or narrative of the game. They may operate through either the mechanics or narrative in that the decision might be made overtly within the dialogue options presented to the player (fig. 6.3) thus existing primarily
within the narrative. Or the decision may be within the scope of what is permitted mechanically, such as when the mechanics of combat give the player the choice between disarming enemies and avoiding killing them altogether. See, for example, figure 6.4’s depiction of stealthy combat in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal, 2011). Each time the player stealthily approaches an enemy, they are given the option of performing either a non-lethal takedown (left trigger) rendering the enemy alive but unconscious, or a lethal takedown (right trigger) in which they murder the enemy using a bladed physical augmentation.

These ‘open’ ethical acts are less subtly presented to the player than the unavoidable ‘closed’ acts comprising the first level of ethical design. They often call the player’s attention to both the discrete action itself, as well as the game’s dynamic reaction to it. For instance, the decision may be made within the dialogue, and this choice may then be rewarded with moral ‘points’ – discussed later in this chapter. In so doing they encourage – or even force – the player to make a decision (which may or may not be rewarded or punished).

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3 A takedown refers to the act of defeating an opponent in one move using physical contact. It can be hand-to-hand or using a weapon (such as the butt of a rifle or a knife). Often prompted on-screen when certain parameters are met (i.e. being behind/close to the enemy, or having depleted a certain amount of their health already) and enacted by pushing a corresponding button.

4 The L2 and R2 buttons of a console controller, located around the back. Usually operated using the middle fingers and often used to fire weapons.
For example, in Quantic Dream’s *Heavy Rain* (2010), the player is instructed to perform a series of trials. If performed successfully, they are rewarded with clues as to the whereabouts of their kidnapped son. In one such test, the game asks ‘are you prepared to kill someone to save your son?’ After being directed to the home of a drug dealer and, following a successful quick-time event\(^5\) chase around the house, the player is given the choice to kill or spare him (fig. 6.5). This decision is made more difficult by the knowledge that to not kill him means the player character’s son is more likely to die. However, the dealer waves a photograph of his ‘girls’ before your eyes and begs you to spare him for their sake. Such open ethical decisions are often not only overt and ‘in the player’s face’, but also are problematised through the evocation of emotions, making the decision more difficult. As I have already highlighted in the example of my reflexive process in chapter three (where I discussed how my experience of miscarriage influenced my affective response to *Heavy Rain*), the player’s emotional reactions to these ethical decisions can be strong.

\(^5\) As mentioned in chapter three, a quick-time event (QTE) is a game mechanic whereby on-screen instructions prompt the player to perform a particular corresponding interaction with the interface in order for particular in-game events to successfully take place. A delay or incorrect interaction following the prompt often results in the failure of the intended action.
As mentioned in chapter five – some games encourage the player to accumulate points which can be thought of as a kind of capital in the way they employ a component of open ethical design that reacts to the player’s decisions. That is, they not only track such decisions, but dynamically react to them – potentially opening or closing off options to the player, or rewarding the player in different ways depending on the moral direction taken.

**Accumulating Moral Capital**

As has already been discussed at length in chapter four, the use of traumatic, violent, and spectacular images, as well as the narrative deployment of melodramatic tropes serves to produce an ethical response in the player. The use of these images, scenarios, and early vulnerability within the combat can manifest in not only the encouragement of, but also demanding of, a response from the player along the lines of a forced ethical decision. Several of the AAA titles analysed as part of this study contain a system of trackable ethical decisions as a core mechanic which has an impact on the gameworld and narrative outcome as a core mechanic. The games’ axis of morality often takes a binary form, such as renegade vs. paragon in the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare, 2007-2012), lethal vs. non-lethal in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal, 2011),
peaceful vs. chaotic in *Dishonored* (Arcane Studios, 2012), and good vs. evil in *Fable III* (Lionhead Studios, 2010). These decisions have feedback not only in the form of moral points, but also approval or disapproval from NPCs, new player character abilities, opening or closing storylines or quests, and different endings. As mentioned in chapter five, these trackable ethical decisions can result in the accumulation of moral capital (‘good’, ‘bad’, and in some cases, ‘neutral’, such as *Fallout 3* [Bethesda Game Studios, 2008]). In the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare, 2007-2012), players are required to make ethical decisions and accumulate morality points, represented via fillable bars (see again figure 4.7 on page 117). Once a set amount of ‘moral capital’ has been acquired, the player character can perform certain actions related to their alignment such as persuade an NPC or undertake a particular quest. In *Dishonored* (Arcane Studios, 2012), killing NPCs results in a higher ‘chaos’ rating at the end of each level (fig. 6.6). This leads to a darker and more foreboding aesthetic in the final level of the game; a higher number of infected ‘weeper’ enemies; a change in the way other NPCs address and behave around the player character; as well as a darker cut scene during the game’s epilogue.

![Figure 6.6](image_url)

Chaos rating in *Dishonored* (Arcane Studios, 2012)

This moral capital can count as another form of in-game capital in that it furnishes the player with options or skills they would not have access to otherwise. In this way,
morality is made into tangible, rewardable forms of capital which have value in their ability to be accumulated, maintained, deployed and exploited.

Experiencing All Paths and Moral Achievements

As games are often intended to be played and replayed, elements of the narrative and playstyle – involving branching ethical options and choices for the player – can be used to encourage repeat play. For example, the experiences of playing a ‘low chaos’ playthrough of Dishonoured (Arcane Studios, 2012) or a ‘pacifist’ playthrough of Deus Ex: Human Revolution (Eidos Montreal, 2011) are different experiences to playthroughs branded as ‘high chaos’ and ‘lethal’ respectively. The moral approach the player takes means that playing through different moralities can result in a different game experience. As previously stated, the options open to the player, NPCs’ responses to the player, the range of combat styles that can be deployed, and even the ending can vary depending on the ethical acts perpetrated by the player and the ethical decisions they make. Indeed, in order to reap the reward of tracked ethical acts, players are encouraged to choose a moral direction and stick to it such that they accumulate enough moral capital to result in more interesting and rewarding play. This means that many players may play through a preferred game several times in order to experience the moral paths which are different to their previous playthrough (see, for instance, Gordon, 2014).

The player’s need to be morally consistent is made more evident when the achievements and trophies used to reward the player for in-game acts have an ethical dimension. Although the games I studied are predominantly offline and single player, that does not mean they do not have an online and socially connected component. As many console players now play logged in to their Microsoft and PlayStation accounts, gaming alone in one’s home is a more connected activity than ever before. These accounts not only allow friends and others to potentially view what one has been playing, but also see how well one is performing. Most games now have features which are part of this metagame. While trophies (PlayStation) and Achievements (Xbox) are awarded for particular in-game acts they are a metagame capital (as detailed in chapter five). They are cumulative and add to a score displayed as part of the player’s online ID. They can be awarded for actions ranging from the mundane (such as completing a
main storyline quest or finishing the game), to the esoteric (performing an unusual or silly action or finding a secret), to the skilful (applying multiple handicaps or completing the game on a high difficulty). There are often achievements rewarding acts with an ethical dimension. For instance, a selection of such achievements for *Dishonored* (Arcane Studios, 2012) is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thief</td>
<td>You pickpocketed items worth a total of 200 coins.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Versatile</td>
<td>You killed characters with each weapon and offensive gadget.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost</td>
<td>You completed all missions after the prologue, alerting or killing no one but key targets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wall of Sparks</td>
<td>You killed an enemy with the Wall of Light.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulator</td>
<td>You made others kill 5 of their own allies. [By taking possession of them].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean Hands</td>
<td>You completed the game without killing anyone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleaner</td>
<td>You fought 5 enemies at once and none of them survived.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dunwall in Chaos</td>
<td>You completed the game in high chaos. [Requires killing people on most levels].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Just Dark Enough</td>
<td>You completed the game in low chaos. [Requires killing few people].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentleman Caller</td>
<td>You completed all the Granny Rags side missions. [Requires killing Slackjaw and making him into soup – cannot be unlocked in the same playthrough as Street Conspiracy].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street Conspiracy</td>
<td>You completed all the Slackjaw side missions [Requires killing Granny Rags].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetic Justice</td>
<td>You neutralised all key targets using indirect [non-lethal] means.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Dishonored, Arcane Studios, 2012)*

Some of these achievements – such as Dunwall in Chaos and Just Dark Enough – are mutually exclusive and involve separate playthroughs, in which the player must only perform acts falling within a boundary of ‘acceptable’ ethical behaviour for the

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In gaming, a ‘quest’ is a task to be completed for a reward or for narrative progression.
purposes of unlocking that achievement. Thus, whilst AAA games are increasingly giving players the option to play along a certain moral path through ‘open’ ethical design, they are also encouraging them, via the achievement system, to repeat-play alternative moralities. This includes, therefore, moral paths and ethical acts the player would be less inclined to take and perform, yet may choose to do so in order to see what they missed the first time around or to unlock the achievements.

A Note on Ethically Gaming the Game

‘Gaming the game’ describes the situation when the player has a knowledge of certain mechanics and manipulates them, or strives to achieve certain goals, which may not be the goals dictated by the game. Sometimes the knowledge is about a specific bug or loophole that can be exploited for player benefit. The player’s actions are thus dictated by knowledge of game processes and not by more intuitive interaction with the game. For example, when playing The Last of Us (Naughty Dog, 2012) on ‘survivor’ difficulty, I found one battle was rendered much less challenging if I backed into the corner of a small room and used the door as a chokepoint. By positioning my ally near this door I was able to take advantage of the fact that the enemy AI would make the enemies attack her, leaving me to pick them off at a safe distance. This specific knowledge of the game’s system allowed me to utilise this tactic, rather than intuitively engaging the enemies and thus I was ‘gaming the game’.

It is key that the unavoidable ethical acts that are part of the first ‘closed’ level of ethical action are presented as being non-negotiable, as there are instances where players discover loopholes (intended or unintended on the part of the developers) within the mechanics, which they can exploit in order to bypass or alter the intended act. For instance, the makers of Fallout 4 (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015) created various narrative and mechanical options for players who want to keep their kill count to a minimum. The game includes a stealth mode whereby players can sneak past enemies and thus avoid a fight; a pacify option (an optional player character upgrade

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7 A ‘bug’ is a programming fault within the software of the game, and which causes the game to glitch – to behave in an unintended or incorrect way.
8 In military strategy, a chokepoint is a narrowing of a route that the enemy must take in order to reach their goal which will slow their movements and thus render them more vulnerable to attack.
9 Artificial intelligence (AI) in a video game context refers to the algorithms which govern intelligent behaviour in enemies and NPCs.
whereby pointing a weapon at an enemy has a chance of causing them to become non-hostile); and various persuade options within the dialogue to pacify potentially hostile NPCs. Lead developer Todd Howard, when explaining these options before release, stated that in *Fallout 4* ‘you can avoid [killing] a lot. I can’t tell you that you can play the whole game without violence—that’s not necessarily a goal of ours—but we want to support different playstyles as much as we can’ (Makuch, 2015: n. pag.). These actions are optional and indeed, some violent interaction is unavoidable within the game (i.e. you cannot progress with the main quest without killing – directly or indirectly – the antagonist and mini-boss\(^\text{10}\) Kellog). Since its release, however, some players have sought ways to do entirely ‘no kills’ playthroughs; they seek to game the game by exploiting loopholes within the mechanics in order to complete the game in a manner which was unintended. Rather than being able to finish the game peacefully, what matters to these players is that their tracked kill count remains at zero: ‘this was a ‘pacifist run’ in the sense that the stats in-game recorded no kills. Throughout the run, I was responsible for many people and things being killed but they were never attributed to me [by the game stats]’ (Zipx777, 2015: n. pag.). To achieve this, they trap enemies in certain areas of the map; kite\(^\text{11}\) enemies into other characters who will kill them for the player, and perform time-consuming or unusual actions. One player who documented their no kill playthrough began experiencing glitches\(^\text{12}\) related to their playstyle, presumably because they were not playing in an intended or anticipated manner (Hernandez, 2015: n. pag.). This approach to gameplay highlights how some players engage with ethical acts within the game. That is, they do not consider whether these acts are problematic. Rather, they see the moral game mechanics as being like any other game mechanic – something to be played with, explored, exploited and mastered. This ties in not only with the ultimate goal of gaming being one of mastery (as discussed in chapters four and five) but also allows us to see how it is the *gameness* (Juul, 2001) of the game – its rules and play – which must always be considered in our analysis. Players not only relate to games as carriers of media content, but also as rule-

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\(^{10}\) A boss is a powerful and unique enemy, usually encountered at the end of the level. They are difficult to beat and often require a strategy. A mini-boss is also a powerful and often unique enemy, encountered on the approach to the more dangerous boss.

\(^{11}\) Kiting refers to a fighting style in which the player maintains distance from an attacking enemy such that they cannot be hurt by it. This allows for, among other things, the use of long range attacks (should the player character’s long range attack be longer in range than the enemies) or as a means of distracting the enemy whilst others attack on behalf of the player.

\(^{12}\) The term ‘glitch’ describes when the game acts incorrectly or inconsistently due to a fault in the game software which results in errors. Glitches occur because of “bugs”.
bound spaces for play and domination. I now turn to explore data from my immersive research journal documenting my affective engagement with moral decision-making, in which I find similarities between my decision-making processes and the players discussed here.

**Affective Ethical Decision-Making**

[The player has to decide to execute their lover or the leaders of the peasant mob]

Logan: ‘I am giving you power over life and death. […] What are you willing to sacrifice in order to do the right thing?’

*(Fable III, Lionhead Studios, 2010)*

[The player has to decide whether to execute their tyrannical brother]

Logan: ‘The sacrifices I had to make, I did them to protect Albion. If a few had to suffer, it was to build an army. If a few had to die, it was to save a country. […] You have the power over life and death, sister. Now choose.’

*(Fable III, Lionhead Studios, 2010)*

In my immersive research journal, the open ethical decisions forcing player engagement made me feel the weight of responsibility; I had to make the ‘right’ decision:

Regardless of the repercussions of my choice directly on the game [none, except for the voice over in the closing sequence] I still felt *I had to consider my choice and make the ‘right’ one*, even though the game neither encourages nor discourages any of the options. [emphasis added]

*(Immersive Research Journal: Deus Ex: Human Revolution)*

However, this did not always mean that the ‘right’ decision was the ethically ‘good’ one according to the society in which I live or my own sense of morality. Rather, various factors were taken into consideration. Firstly, there was a desire to maintain a consistent and believable player character personality – this is explored in depth towards the end of this chapter. Also, narrative and mechanical needs were weighed, occasionally against each other. When making open ethical decisions, I considered the narrative by thinking about the options leading to the ‘best’ or most appropriate ending
vis-à-vis the goals of my player character. When I based ethical decision-making processes on mechanical outcomes, I took into account the options that might provide my player character with the best abilities and items such that gameplay became more interesting, diverse, or easier/harder (according to the specific kind of experience I was seeking). For example, whilst playing the first few hours of *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2012), I was confronted with a trapped, newly infected man who begged me to end his life before he ‘turns’. Pinned under a bookcase, he posed no risk to my player character and as such I could choose to grant his request – at the cost of at least one of my precious bullets – or leave him to his unhappy fate:

That the characters really fear the infection and what it does to you makes you more sensitive to it. You meet a trapped man whose mask has broken. You can choose whether to kill him mercifully (as he begs you to), or to save your bullets and leave him to his fate. There are no consequences for either choice other than you have one less bullet. This matters on survivor [the hardest difficulty setting at the time] where every resource is precious - doing the ‘right’ thing therefore also becomes more difficult on a higher difficulty level. I played on insanity and felt very guilty about leaving him. He continued to call to me as I left him.

(Immersive Research Journal: *The Last of Us*)

When playing on ‘survivor’ difficulty, the mechanical needs of the game out-weighed my own sense of morality – I felt guilty about it, but winning the game was more important to me than my player character ending that NPC’s suffering. Similarly, the consideration of mechanical outcomes is clear in the following journal entry from the game *Dishonored* (Arcane Studios, 2012). The desire for a more challenging and restricted mode of gameplay led me to choose to play the ‘good’ (non-lethal) way:

At the end of each level I was given stats about how I'd completed that level: runes/bone charms found, Sokolov paintings found, alarms triggered, enemies killed, and chaos level - high/low. I found that this encouraged me to stealth through the game and kill no one in order to achieve a low chaos rating, as this was much harder than utilising melee combat. It took more control and more thought and planning. Resources were more scarce as most weapons [were lethal and as such] were unusable [on a non-lethal playthrough]. It was therefore the
fact that it was harder to be ‘good’ which made me determined to play that way. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: Dishonored)

Again, I privileged my chosen play style over a preferred moral path. In this instance, unlike the previous journal entry, the tracking and differentiation of certain ethical acts led me to choose to perform ‘good’ acts (according to the game’s morality). These journal entries show that within open ethical design there were conflicts between the desire to behave in a certain way and the desire to maintain a consistent player character personality. The mechanical and narrative ‘weighting’ behind each option were pulls and claims which had to be considered and negotiated during play. As such, while an ethical dilemma may be presented to the player, they do not necessarily use ethical reasoning to solve it.

Nevertheless, open ethical design can function to draw the player’s attention to an issue and force them to engage with it. It can make the player feel empowered, whilst also potentially creating negative affects:

The game really makes you feel the demands and the horrors of command. Garrus discusses what he calls ‘ruthless calculus’ – sacrificing the few to save the many. You can make many small and large decisions throughout the game, which make you feel like you have the yoke of power around your neck. It weighs you down. For example, if you don’t have enough reputation, you can’t save both the Geth and the Quarians, and you have to make a decision. If you choose the Quarians, Legion and the other Geth die. If you choose the Geth, the Quarians are overwhelmed and Tali or Ran will commit suicide. This power to not only make decisions, but also to make the wrong decision (or a decision with negative consequences for a group) is a theme of the game and made me feel at once empowered and burdened. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: Mass Effect 3)

Being forcibly presented with ethical dilemmas can thus not only produced guilt (depending on one’s decision – as demonstrated by my The Last of Us journal entry on the previous page), but the burden of responsibility and choice also produce particular, potentially ‘negative’ affects. These forced decisions and the potential negative affects they produce are significant, given that emotions such as guilt have
been shown to reduce players’ immersive states (as discussed in chapter two). How then does the player negotiate this relationship such that gameplay is both immersive and enjoyable? One of the most interesting threads to emerge from this discussion is that, due to a video game’s ability to insist upon certain ethical acts (at the first, ‘closed’ level), and also its ability to track and reward ethical acts (at the second, ‘open’ level), the player must therefore become complicit with the mechanics of the game in order to advance and succeed.

**Maintaining Immersion by Following the Rules**

This section of chapter six continues to draw on my immersive research journal entries to consider how affective responses to ethical acts are negotiated to maintain a state of immersion. Through this discussion, and by drawing on the literature about ethical gaming outlined in chapter two, the notion of a moral habitus, which allows the player to effectively negotiate these problematic ethical acts without negative repercussions, is put forward.

In my research journal entries I repeatedly noted that certain negative affects (such as guilt) were elicited through making what I perceived to be ‘bad’ decisions or performing acts judged by my internal sense of morality to be wrong:

I accidentally knocked out an NPC by pressing the wrong button when near her. This caused the other NPCs in the area to become very afraid of me, cry out, cower, and run away. I felt *both guilty about this action but also very frustrated* that the game would allow me to perform such an action by mistake. I didn’t realise at this point that I could kill or knock out NPCs if I chose to. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: *Grand Theft Auto V*)

I HATED the torture scene. I felt physically sick whilst torturing Mr K. There was no way out. I would not have done it if the game had given me the option to say no. The choice was to do it or turn off the game. If I had been playing for fun, I might have even given up on the game. It felt *less immersive because of my repulsion*. Every time the narrative was sent back to Trevor (‘we need more’) I winced and my heart sank. I began swearing. After the torture scene, I felt so
disenfranchised with the game and found myself resisting the immersion - as if it would taint me. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: Grand Theft Auto V)

Strong feelings of guilt were elicited when the game forced me to perform what I perceived as ‘wrong’ actions or when they occurred accidentally. As has been explored on pages 60-61 of chapter two, negative affects such as guilt can inhibit immersion and so feeling these affects when performing the ethical acts described above reduced my feeling of immersion and ‘pulled’ me out. In the next section I outline how this issue was ethically negotiated as I immersed myself in violent, and thus ethically problematic, gameplay.

Open Ethical Design: Maintaining Character

At the second level of ethical interaction – open ethical design – the player is encouraged or even forced to make ethical decisions as part of the narrative and mechanics of the game. Returning to the discussion of how the player negotiates immersion in the methodology chapter of this thesis I argued that in order to maintain immersion not only must the fictional world adhere to a set of rules, but also the immersant (immersed player) must be complicit within those rules – they have to actively ‘buy into’ the fiction and its structure. Design flaws and software errors such as bugs cause glitches that break these rules in a way that the immersant perceives as unintended and can thus cause a loss of immersion. This need to not ‘break the rules’ can be seen to apply to elements of the game over which the player has control. For example, as with film characters, the personality of the video game character has to be consistent (if not ‘believable’) in order that the rules of the game that sustain believability and immersion are maintained; they have to act ‘in character’. When characters have to participate in violent action and make ethical decision, then this means of negotiating gameplay – by complying with the implied narrative rules – has a clear ethical dimension. My immersive research journal evidences how I navigated this need for my player character to adhere to the rules of the game (in order to maintain immersion), whilst also having to act in a manner I deemed morally wrong, causing moral dissonance and impeding immersion. I found this need to ‘maintain character’ was true for both pre-scripted player characters over whom I had little control as to
what they said and what ethical decisions they made, and also for player-designed characters where I had a greater level of choice regarding aspects of their personality and behaviour. Having this control over characters’ choices and behaviour when playing within a violent gameworld means that the player must therefore become complicit in their character’s violent actions or else they risk a loss of immersion.

I felt very sad when Isolde begged me not to kill her son. I ended up punching her and killing Connor [her son] because my character was ruthless and I felt anything else would be out of character. I felt compelled to *keep character continuity* more than I felt I had to do the right thing, however uncomfortable it made me. It was still *more immersive that way*. [emphasis added]  

(Immersive Research Journal: *Dragon Age Origins*)

I really enjoy playing as Trevor. It's as if I can be immoral and enjoy it because *that's how Trevor acts*. [...] I felt ill when I kept accidentally hitting coyotes and he kept saying stuff like ‘squish’. But after a few hours of playing as him (a psychotic maniac) I found I was actually aiming for them. It had become fun to listen to his reaction. It is something I as a vegan would never think was okay, but it just *seemed like something Trevor would do*. [emphasis added]  

(Immersive Research Journal: *Grand Theft Auto V*)

One character I played as was an evil rogue prince who dragged people to work and shot those he didn’t like. When I did these things I didn’t feel as much discomfort as I thought I would because I reasoned that it was part of this person’s character – it’s not me forcing people into slavery. It’s just *what this character does*. [emphasis added]  

(Immersive Research Journal: *Fable III*)

It is evident that by prioritising the need to act ‘in character’, instead of allowing my own morality to dictate how I made ethical decisions within the game, I avoided experiencing the ‘moral dissonance’ produced by guilt and other negative affects. Therefore, I was still able to experience immersion. In order to reduce or eliminate the negative affects initially produced by these ethical actions, the ethical decisions and actions outlined here had to be both understood and negotiated as being a part of the
player character’s personality, and thus seen as necessary for adhering to the rules and to maintain continuity.

*Closed Ethical Design: Internalising the Rules*

At the first level of ethical interaction – closed ethical design – the player is not given a choice about the ethical acts they participate in; the ethical acts are an unalterable and unavoidable part of the game’s progress. Thus, when playing through such acts, the player is made complicit in these acts. In my research journal, I charted my responses to this complicity with the game’s morality:

As I played my sense of moral vs. immoral action within the game came to match the mechanics of reward and chastising within the mechanics. I felt that killing an enemy was not an immoral action, because they attacked me first; that was the point of the game/their role within the game, and because the game rewarded me when I killed them. I felt, however, that killing NPCs was not a moral action because of the way the other NPCs would then react – fear or aggression. I *took on board this morality* and therefore felt little discomfort when killing enemies (except, perhaps, when they were in pain or I killed them in gruesome ways) but a great deal of discomfort if I accidentally killed an NPC (which I did and was forced to reload because I regretted it). [emphasis added]

*(Immersive Research Journal: BioShock Infinite)*

I attempted to code GTA V early on in the research process and found it very frustrating. I *really struggled with the driving mechanics* because I never play driving games as a hobby. I found myself getting very angry and stressed whilst attempting to code it. There were some quests I seemed unable to complete. I was also feeling *very disturbed by the level of violence* and the seeming revelling in it. After several stressful and unproductive days, culminating in tears of frustration, I resolved to return to GTA V at the end of this stage of my research when I am more used to the coding process and when I felt I might have more patience and time to get used to the controls. [...] The driving was much less frustrating [the second attempt]. More interestingly, I was *much more comfortable with the violence second time around*. I noticed the humour with which it is portrayed which I failed to see the first time. [emphasis added]

*(Immersive Research Journal: Grand Theft Auto V)*
These journal entries highlight how, as I played, I began to internalise the moral mechanics of the game. In the first entry, I felt guilty for killing NPCs because their reactions (such as fear) positioned them as ‘non-killable’ (not in that they could not be killed, but rather that they should not be; that it is an immoral act in a world where some characters are indeed ‘killable’). Their reactions structured my moral response. Whereas, as enemies both attacked me first and because I understood their role within the narrative as ‘killable’, I felt no guilt for killing them. The mechanics of the game thus determined my moral-affective response to ethical interactions with the characters.

The second journal entry shows the time it took for me to become more comfortable with the moral rules of the game, as well as how my enjoyment was dependant on my successful internalisation of those rules. As I played, my disgust response was lessened and eventually mitigated. I was not only able to play and enjoy these violent games without experiencing any moral dissonance from these ‘unethical’ acts, but in accepting and internalising the moral rules of the game, I was able to achieve both pleasure in performing these acts, and a deeper state of immersion. Through this process of internalisation of such mechanics, it is evident that I became complicit in the closed and non-negotiable moral rules of the gameworld.

The Rules of the Game and Developing a Moral Habitus

In highlighting my negotiation of ethical acts within the gameworld, I am not claiming that all players will also do as I did and internalise the rules of the game such that the negative affects impeding immersion are negated and thus immersive states reached. Nevertheless, as I outlined at the beginning of this chapter, other researchers have recognised that understanding ethical acts as being simply the ‘rules of the game’ is a central component not only of player’s ethical response to violent gaming, but also to activities outside of gaming – such as sports (Bredemeier & Shields, 1986). Therefore I now consider not only why other players may also negotiate and internalise the moral rules of the gameworld as I did, but also how this operates. An application of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus can allow us to explore and account for this process.

As has been mentioned, players need to learn the game’s system of controls as their internalisation of these controls allows them to create and maintain a level of haptic (touch-based) communication with the game. In so doing, they form a specific gaming habitus (Kirkpatrick, 2012), enabling them to enter the first level of immersion.
The journal entry on page 201 was written when struggling with the driving controls for *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013). It highlights the frustration and lack of connection to the game created when a player has not developed the necessary habitus for success. Developing this habitus is not only essential for success within the gameworld, but it also has a significant impact on the players’ relationship to, and involvement with, the game. This process is aided by various elements of the game’s opening levels, which introduce the player to the controls one at a time, giving them the time and opportunity to test each in turn, and become comfortable and confident with them (fig. 6.7).

![Figure 6.7](image)

**Figure 6.7**
Learning the controls in *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos Montreal, 2011)

Extrapolating this relationship and how it is encouraged to develop through these early levels, it is possible to take this understanding of the game control habitus and apply it to theorise how a player negotiates a game’s moral systems. Such moral systems are enforced and rewarded through the game’s rules and mechanics. Like the above screenshot showing the game guiding the player and developing this necessary habitus, the games I analysed likewise ‘held the player’s hand’ and led them through a barrage of traumatic prologues. These game features, as I have already shown in chapter four, act as cues for identification and moral disengagement. They subtly reinforce rules that outline how, when, and upon whom violent retribution can be meted out (as was the case with the red signals highlighting an enemy’s status as killable in figure 6.2 on
page 186). In so doing, as I have already shown with my immersive research journal entries, the player’s disgust response is lessened over time due to moral disengagement cues and increasing familiarity with the moral mechanics. In order for the player to achieve immersion these moral systems are necessary for the player to negotiate, ‘learn’, and in so doing, internalise.

This chapter has served to outline some of the mechanics restricting and promoting the moral rules of specific AAA games. These rules could be said to create and maintain an ‘ethical field’ of gaming which serves to ‘produce and authorise certain discourses and activities’ (Webb et al., 2002: 21). Upon entering the field, players are required to attain forms of game capital (e.g. the useful items and skills outlined in chapter five) such that, in order to achieve and master the game (as shown in chapter four), players must ‘have its specific dispositions imposed upon them’ (Murariu, 2010: 2) and play by the rules. The accumulation of this capital enables the player to ‘change the hierarchy’ (Wacquant, 2008). There is a process of negotiation and coproduction between the player and the game rules which are part of this field.

I do not suggest the player’s negotiation of these moral rules necessarily constitutes a ‘blind’ internalisation. Rather, the player not only works with, but also to some extent, works around these moral rules such that they are able to achieve a system of ethical play. This ethical play allows them to negate cognitive dissonance and achieve immersion. The player coproduces their ethical play with and through the moral rules that are enforced via the game mechanics and narrative. This relationship is evident in my immersive research journal in which I document how I negotiated the negative affects and the resultant moral dissonance when playing as an anti-hero (page 200). Through negotiating the moral rules of the game I was able to see the violent actions perpetrated by the player character as being either part of my character’s personality or as an unavoidable element of gameplay (and thus something I could not feel guilt for as it was not in my power to alter). In so doing, I was able to diminish the negative affects these violent actions created and consequently was able to achieve an immersive state. I propose that this internalising of the control system and the negotiation of a game’s moral systems and rules can be thought of as a set of acquired dispositions; namely it becomes part of the player’s habitus. This habitus allows the player to avoid negative affects that might affect their achieving immersion. It is thus a necessary requirement for both successful and pleasurable play.
Conclusion

This chapter provides a new perspective on violent, immersive gaming. Through mapping the ethical choices – both open and closed – within the AAA titles studied, I have outlined how ethical responses are structured and rewarded by the game. The various ethical avenues available for the player are dependent on the game rules – how they are imposed and enforced, and whether there is space for negotiation and creativity within them. Through an understanding of the passive and active mechanisms by which we become immersed, I theorised the ethical positioning of the player within violent gameplay as being one of negotiation and internalisation of the moral rules. This conceptualisation does not recognise the player as being merely a passive recipient, blindly following the moral rules and participating in ‘unethical’ and problematic in-game acts. Rather, the player plays with the moral rules of the game; they are an active participator and negotiator within the ethical field of gaming. Through developing a moral habitus specific to the game being played, the player is able to enter into the moral rules of the gameworld such that their involvement in problematic acts does not create moral dissonance and negative affects. The cognitive dissonance and disgust response produced when players perpetrate actions that do not sit comfortably with their own sense of morality can be negated. As the game introduces the player to a greater range of ethical acts and moral options over time, they are given space to take cues from the moral disengagement mechanisms and the mechanical structures of gameplay, and thus develop their moral habitus in line with the moral rules of the game.
Conclusion

The substantive chapters of this thesis explored three lines of interrogation arising from this research in order to get critical access to the broader issues of affect, motivation and identification in immersive gaming. They also sought to test the developed immersive autoethnography. As such, this conclusion draws the analytic threads of the analysis chapters together to build up a larger, overarching, picture. Before laying out the theoretical and methodological conclusions and contributions of this work, I revisit the research questions and aims in order to highlight how this project has sought to answer and fulfil them respectively. In concluding this thesis I explore how these aims have been met before discussing the limitations of this research and how it could be extended in the future.

Reconsidering the Research Questions and Aims

This research aimed to consider the following research questions:

- What can an immersive participatory research method reveal about the play experiences and the player’s potential relationship to gameplay and the gameworld?
- How do the structures (narrative, technological, and immersive) of violent narrative-led AAA video games encourage certain modes of player involvement, identification, and affective responses?
- How do these structures interpellate the affected, immersed video game player within gendered, classed, or raced subject positions?

In addressing these questions, this thesis aimed to explore a number of further themes, including questions of agency, subjectivity, and ethics. Specific aims were:

- To develop and test an immersive participatory methodology.
- To explore, through visual, audial, technological, and immersive aspects, the embodied and affective dimensions of immersive gameplay.
• To deconstruct the normative and transgressive elements of game mechanics.

The aims of this thesis were thus firstly theoretical and secondly methodological; to reveal something about both games and gaming as well as the broader cultural moment, and to develop and test an immersive participatory method.

**Substantive Discussions and Conclusions**

In order to draw together the threads of analysis and discussion explored throughout the substantive chapters of this thesis, I briefly revisit the main arguments made in chapters three through five. In so doing, I refresh the analysis and ensuing discussion, and draw them together to build a larger picture about motivation, desire, affect and identification in immersive, violent gaming.

In chapter four, ‘The Traumatised Player (Character): Violent Spectacle, Immersive Investment, and the Desire to Master’, I argued that deploying the affective devices of (mechanical and narrative) trauma, melodrama and (technological and violent) spectacle in these AAA games functions to tie the player into a deeper identificatory relationship to the victim-hero-survivor player character. In so doing the game also demands an ethical response from the player; a response which can only be enacted through the performance of legitimate violence in the name of retribution and ‘winning’. I showed how this ability to sublimate and master is a core gaming mechanic. Utilising a gendered and raced analytical lens, I concluded chapter four arguing that, by virtue of these affective and immersive elements which are employed to attach the player to the gameworld and the outcome, these AAA titles narratively and mechanically situate the player initially within a feminised, ‘lacking’ subject position. Through various mechanisms (such as accumulating various forms of game capital and developing moral habitus – chapters five and six respectively) the player is able to overcome this lack, reclaim their agency, and are interpellated within a subject potion that is predicated on a mode of mastery rooted in white, Western masculinity.

Chapter five, ‘Incentivising Accumulating: Game Capital and the Neoliberal Subject’, was concerned with problematising the mechanic of accumulation which is necessary for success in most AAA games. I argued that, despite many games containing explicit criticisms (both anxious and humorous) about late-capitalist
ideology, their mechanics seem to work at cross-purposes to this approach, by tracking and incentivising the rampant, necessary accumulation of various forms of game capital. By drawing on Foucault’s notions of panopticonism and disciplinary power, I argued that the accumulation of various beneficial tools and aids are an affective, seductive mechanic of gaming – one that motivates player action and encourages viewing the player character as a ‘project’ on which one ‘works’. Taking this view enabled me to theorise the relationship between accumulation and game capital by understanding them as acting as technologies of the self. The accumulating, self-improving and investing player occupies a neoliberal (middle-class, male) subject position. I concluded that the ludonarrative dissonance (Hocking, 2007, in Murphy, 2016) existing in the tension between the narrative disavowal of, and anxiety about, late-capitalist ideology and the necessary and unavoidable accumulation present within game mechanics negates these games’ ability to be critical.

In chapter six, ‘Maintaining Immersion through Moral Habitus’, I attempted to provide a new perspective on violent and immersive gaming by mapping the ethical choices presented to the player in these AAA games and examining how the player’s potential ethical responses are both structured and rewarded by the game’s narrative and mechanics. In so doing, this chapter showed how the ethical avenues available to the player, and imposed by the game’s rules, are unavoidable and trackable. Nevertheless, as I highlighted, there is often space for negotiation and creativity within these ethical mechanics depending on the approach of the player. By drawing on theories of immersion and my immersive research data, the second half of chapter six extended this discussion of ethical game mechanics by theorising the ethical positioning of the player within violent gameplay as being one of negotiation and internalisation of the moral rules. I argued that, over time, the player develops a moral habitus specific to the game being played. In so doing, they are able to enter into the moral rules of the gameworld such that their involvement in problematic acts do not create moral dissonance and negative affects. This chapter concluded that developing this game specific moral habitus is a necessary component for successful, pleasurable, and immersive gameplay.
Methodological Conclusions and Contributions

The immersive methodology deployed as part of this thesis’ research methods built upon the discussion of games studies literature and affect in chapter one, ‘Studying Affective, Violent Games: Approaches and Tensions’, understandings of immersion and identification in chapter two, ‘Theoretical Framework: Investment, Immersion and the Subject’, and the discussion of autoethnography, autobiography, reflexivity and subjectivity in chapter three, ‘The Immersive Method’. It sought to extend the analysis of interactive media (specifically video games) into the realm of the immersive, affective and experiential through utilising the researcher’s relationship to their object of study as a means of data collection and critical insight. Following a brief return to the premise, strengths, and limitations of autoethnography as a method more broadly, I revisit and extend the applications and limitations of my immersive method (which were touched upon briefly at the end of chapter three).

Autoethnography was developed in response to the ‘triple crisis’ of representation, legitimation and authority within research into humans and societies and at a time when ‘positivist-informed “master” or “grand” narratives claim[ing] objectivity, authority and researcher neutrality in the study of social and cultural life’ (Short et al., 2013: 3) began to be questioned. While it is practised widely and across disciplines, several decades later autoethnography is still a contested research method. This difficulty stems from the role of the autoethnographic researcher in the creation of knowledge; whereas conventional research methods have clear boundaries between the researcher and the subject/object of research, autoethnography destabilises these boundaries. As autoethnography epistemologically and ontologically ‘turns’ on the experience of the researcher (Spry, 2001: 711, in Ettore, 2005: 544), it is a necessarily subjective method. As such, it has attracted criticism for being unscientific, narcissistic, and unsociological by condensing the personal with the social (Atkinson et al., 2008: 219). However, through connecting the personal to the political, and highlighting the ‘self’ in the construction of knowledge, it can also ‘break down the power relationship between the researcher and the researched’ (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993: 72). ‘Given that the researcher/s and the researched are normally the same people’ (Short et al., 2013: 1), autoethnography is not an easy method to do well. It requires several layers of rigorous reflexivity and critical analysis in order to situate the researcher’s experiences within cultural, political, and social understands. The discussion must
move from autobiographically examining the ‘personal dynamics’ the researcher faces, to autoethnographically examining the ‘cultural dynamics’ (Ettorre, 2017: 2). In drawing explicitly upon the researcher’s experience, there is a danger of positioning that ‘experience as the norm, against which others would be judged’ (Letherby, 2002: para. 5.6). To avoid this, the autoethnographic researcher must practise ‘strong objectivity’ (Harding, 1991) – as opposed to the value-neutral objectivity of scientific research – by considering and making evident their assumptions and biases. Autoethnography’s contribution to knowledge is that it can critically assess experience, illuminating the affective and persuasive commonsenses which shape daily life. It cannot provide a cure for cancer, but it can give insight into the experience of cancer within a specific socio-cultural framework; for instance, see Vardine K. Simeus’ (2016) doctoral research examining her experience of negotiating mental health services during cancer treatment within a Haitian cultural context. In such a case, autoethnographic research can highlight the specific intersectional challenges of accessing healthcare, as well as enabling policy-makers and practitioners to make changes to improve patient well-being.

**Strengths and Applications**

The strength of the immersive autoethnographic method developed and utilised in this thesis is that, when triangulated with other methods, it extends the resulting analyses and discussions into the realm of affect, immersion, and engagement. Consequently, this method enables the researcher to get greater critical purchase on the affective and experiential elements of their research object. This method requires that the researcher be reflexive about their relationship to the research object, and make that reflexive thought and discussion evident as a component of their analysis. Thus it makes the researcher’s assumptions evident and visible within the data, along with the embedded power relationships of their relationship to the object of research, the context of the research, and the situatedness of both the researcher and research object. In so doing, I believe this method aids in the quest for both reflexivity and transparency in processes of research, as well as allowing the researcher to access the affective-experiential elements of their research object. Beyond this, this thesis demonstrates that studies of interactive media might be limited without the reflexive
Conclusion

autoethnographic component which enables the researcher to interrogate the immersive-affective quality of engagement with the research object.

Limitations

As mentioned in chapter three, the immersive method is most useful when it is utilised alongside other methods. I have shown in this thesis that it can be deployed alongside other qualitative methods, such as modes of qualitative content analysis, to reveal and highlight the slippery, affective, and experiential elements of gameplay. As I have argued, by being reflexive and open about my position within the research process, I am not confined to studying myself, but rather can view myself as a socially connected and situated agent. However, the resonances I have highlighted in this thesis’ substantive chapters need to be viewed within that situation. Others will undoubtedly read the games slightly differently if they are from a different social, cultural, temporal location to my own. Nevertheless, I believe that, through maintaining an awareness of the main structures and mechanics of the game, I was able to practise my immersive research journal whilst also keeping an awareness of the ‘grain’ of gameplay. That is, the possible ways (directed by the rules) in which players can engage in gameplay.

Challenges

As has also already been briefly discussed in chapter three, there are mental and physical challenges which have to be traversed when participating in the immersive autoethnographic method developed and utilised here. In this research’s methodological aim to test the immersive method, I am required to be open and visible regarding the potential psychological impact on the immersed researcher (especially when engaging with violent or disturbing media). Hence, the challenges which arose specifically during the course of this project are discussed in greater detail here, as well as suggestions for how they can be overcome.

As this research was undertaken over an intensive period of immersive gameplay lasting six months in total, usually with between six and ten hours of each weekday being devoted to data collection, it was understandably an intense half-year. Several interesting personal changes and affects were noted which relate to the specific context of this research (notably the time of year and the object of research). As the
six months covered a period from late spring to early autumn, there was a sense of the summer being ‘lost’. This was compounded by the necessity for a darkened room and a sensorially deprived state in order to become successfully immersed in the gameplay. Physically, the repetitive nature of player-game physical interaction meant that thumb and eye strain were becoming a difficulty by the end of the research period, as was the sluggish feeling resulting from the sedentary nature of this interaction. Indeed, the immersive method required such focus and bodily stillness that I became convinced halfway through data collection that I had developed a deep-vein thrombosis from sitting cross-legged all day. I had not, but my doctor had difficulty convincing me otherwise. The anxiety surrounding my health was perhaps a result of the intense self-reflection required for this method to succeed.

Even more difficult than the physical challenges of this method were the mental challenges. The sometimes disturbing or upsetting elements of the games played not only led to an altered mood state, but also to me developing new habits and a change in language use. The most notable instance of this came when I had to end a period of immersion into the game Grand Theft Auto V (Rockstar North, 2013) and swiftly cycle to the vets to collect medicine for my guinea pig at the end of the working day. As setting down the controller to leaving my front door took less than five minutes, I had not allowed time for a period of ‘resetting’ which had become a necessity for me to smoothly re-enter ‘everyday’ life at the end of the day of research. I cannot say for certain, but it is my belief that my ensuing road rage – which involved swearing at the driver of a car when they were aggressive with me as well as cycling at a pace I would normally deem to be too fast – were related to the way I had been recklessly driving and aggressively interacting in the gameworld not ten minutes previously. As I alluded to when arguing for the need to immersively engage with texts, Josephine Machon (2013) believes that immersion affects the meanings we take from media and events. It is possible therefore that this instance of out of character recklessness and aggression was at least in part informed by the content of the media in which I had recently been immersed. This is crucial to note, as immersed researchers will need to consider the potential new habits and traits, however briefly they occur, which may result from their research.

It is important to recognise that this instance may not be due to the content of the research object at all, but instead could be a product of the method; that is, from immersion as an intense mode of engagement. Autoethnography is itself a method
which can induce or increase anxious self-reflection (see, for example, Wall, 2008). ‘The self-questioning autoethnography demands is extremely difficult […] Honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self-doubts—and emotional pain’ (Ellis, 1999: 672). Moreover, the intensity of immersive engagement has the potential to amplify this quality. The need to continually maintain focus on the research object, the repetitive nature of the research, and the resulting intensity of feeling all contribute to both the successes, and the difficulties, of the immersive method. As I have mentioned, I struggled to psychically ‘leave’ the research at the end of the day – not as another researcher might, where everything reminds them of their work and they are unable to mentally ‘put it down’. Rather, I struggled to ‘shake off’ the affective experience of the day. If I could not, the resulting irritable mood would follow me around; altering my decisions and interactions each evening. My dreams began to contain content from the games I studied, and the anxiety of gaming mechanics permeated the direction and goals of my nightmares. When the intensive, immersive research period came to an end, therefore, it was not only to my own relief, but my partner’s as well.

Do These Challenges Provide Critical Insight?

Despite there being these particular difficulties which had to be faced whilst undertaking this specific research method, I believe that the resultant data and the discussion that it produced were worth the challenges. Indeed, as I have shown with the negative affects discussed in chapter six, the challenges themselves can provide insight into the object of study and modes of engagement. Over the course of this project I sought to investigate the emotional and affective elements of immersive engagement. The three lines of investigation explored in each substantive chapter – traumatic spectacle, desire to accumulate, and the negotiation of ethical content – have all been informed by my immersive research journal entries which documented my responses to the narrative and mechanical elements of gameplay. In being able to move my discussion of the constraints and freedoms of game mechanics, and the tropes employed within the visual cues and storylines, into an experiential framework by utilising my immersive research journal entries, I have shown how immersive engagement provides access to affective and embodied knowledges. It was the journal entries which discussed the sadness, shame, joy, pride, desire, and motivation which
proved to be both the most provocative and useful when writing up this thesis. It is this method’s ability to create affective states during research that makes it useful to researchers of interactive and immersive media. In order to comment on the feelings that could potentially be evoked by various components of immersive gaming, I was first required to feel them.

**Games Studies Conclusions and Contributions**

By deploying a methodology whereby the researcher considers the experiential, mechanical, and representative aspects of video games as a triumvirate of meaning-making potential, it is possible to identify potential resonances of various game elements. I believe this method has also allowed this thesis to engage with not only the narrative and mechanical elements of gaming (as they both affectively ‘work’ on the player), but also consider the immersive, affective side of gaming – on which it is difficult to achieve critical purchase. This thesis supports the assertion that, due to their interactivity, reactivity, challenge, and ‘gameness’ (Juul, 2011), the power of games is their ability to make player feel like they matter (King & Krzywinska, 2006). This research has shown how narratively and mechanically the game enables the player to (eventually) feel competent and masterful. By placing the player in an initial position of traumatic (feminine) victimhood and deploying spectacular melodramatic tropes, the game works to attach the player to the game outcome, provoke an ethical response, and seek a retributive way to overcome their victimisation. The core mechanics in AAA games usually revolve around the acquisition and accumulation of myriad forms of game capital – skills, abilities, useful objects, money – as well as gamer habitus and moral habitus. The player surveys their player character and views them as a neoliberal (middle-class, male) project – one which must be worked on in order to succeed. These forms of capital all function to endow the player and make them increasingly powerful, eventually enabling them to overcome their initial trauma and lack, reclaiming their agency, and assume a position of (masculine) mastery. I have shown that these discrete game elements – both narrative and mechanic – seductively function to affectively attach the player to not only their character, but also the game ‘rules’, and the game’s outcome. The player’s affective response to being immersed in the game and their interpellation through various game elements and structures is a useful form of knowledge which can enable them to succeed.
Theoretical Conclusions and Contributions

In considering this thesis’ theoretical conclusions and contributions, I now return to the issues explored in the theoretical discussions of chapters one and two. In so doing, I establish this thesis’ contribution beyond the field of games studies and highlight its location within the broader conversations about affect, immersion, and knowledge – from which discussions it draws and to which arenas it seeks to contribute.

Reconsidering Immersion

In this section, I return to the concept of immersion as set up in chapter two of this thesis, which informed the methodology and methods outlined in chapter three. Immersion as explored within the immersive research journals of this thesis has been shown to be contradictory in nature: it is affective and ideological; critical and uncritical; mental and physical; active and passive. For instance, it is demonstrably both active and passive in that I had to choose to immerse myself in the game and actively work at that immersion, and also passive in that I was often ‘caught up’ in the experience of gaming – either experiencing time as going more quickly when playing, or through becoming sensorially disconnected to the world outside the game. Both can be seen in the immersive research journal below:

The final battle demands a very high level of concentration (so much so that I didn’t hear an angry delivery man banging on the door and shouting) as the opponent (a resurrected mechanized Saren) moves position around the confined room at a high speed. I found that, once again, I was holding my breath for a lot of the battle, and my chest and back muscles were tensed as I concentrated anxiously. The moment when I defeated him I let out a big sigh and felt a real sense of achievement – I had done it on a high difficulty level without dying. I felt proud. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: Mass Effect)

I was required to focus – both mentally and physically – in order to achieve the concentration level necessary for competency in one of the most difficult battles of the game. I experienced intense physical reactions to being so immersed within the battle;
muscle tightness, fast heart rate, and chest tension all belied the anxiety aroused as part of immersive play.

In practising an immersive method, this thesis has been able to address Scott McCracken’s (1998) concern that a study into the immersive elements of gaming will set up the player as a passive consumer of games. Utilising an immersive method (in which immersion is conceived as being, at least in part, an active process) allowed this thesis to draw its discussion into an interactionist framework. In chapter four I showed that, despite Guy Debord’s (1995) assertion that the spectacle of mass media is a ‘permanent opium war’ which functions to pacify and depoliticise, visual and technological spectacle as deployed in gaming functions to encourage the player to ethically respond to their trauma and actively seek a position of mastery and sublimation. Moreover, in chapter six, I highlighted the ways in which immersion in the moral rules of the gameworld is a process of negotiation which can alleviate the psychic pain caused by acts which I, as the player, deemed to be wrong.

Reconsidering Affect

When Eric Shouse (2005) claims that the power of media lies not in their ideological content, but ‘their ability to create affective resonances independent of content or meaning’ (para. 14), he is following a popular school of thought which positions affective responses as being prior to cognition, and thus (arguably) without ideological basis. It is true that affective resonances of media are an important component of media effects, and this effect can be seen from the many affective responses documented in my research journal throughout this thesis. However, this research has supported Margaret Wetherell’s (2012) and Valerie Walkerdine’s (2007) work in not automatically disconnecting my affective responses to gameplay with the ideology of gameplay elements and subjectivity of my experiences. For instance, revisiting the research journal extract discussed in chapter four on page 120, it is possible to see how reflexivity and an understanding of the subject is important, even when assessing affective experiences within gaming:

I felt somehow connected to Jenkins [the player character] because of everything he had gone through during the first few hours of the game. Moreover, because he had been [injured and] rebuilt I felt a greater sympathy than if he had gone
through some kind of emotional turmoil. This could be because putting a character through some kind of emotional turmoil is a common tactic used in both games and wider media in order to generate sympathy for and connection to a character. But also because of my own history with body dysmorphic disorder [BDD] I was able to empathise with some of what I imagined he would be going through – feeling like a stranger in one’s own body, feeling that disconnect, understanding the impulse which would have led him to smash the mirror in his bathroom. [emphasis added]

(Immersive Research Journal: Deus Ex: Human Revolution)

I can recall the first time I, as Jenkins, entered his apartment in Deus Ex: Human Revolution and saw the smashed mirror. The feeling of pain and despair was almost visceral in my chest as it called to mind the struggle I had as a teenager with feelings of BDD and shame. This was undoubtedly an affective response; it was an instant shift in mood and had taken me several moments to work out where the feeling was coming from and what it was connected to. Yet it was nevertheless rooted in my own subjective experience. Rather than being a bodily impulse which occurred completely prior to cognition, this affective shift was a response deeply rooted in my experience and a reaction to the presentation of certain narrative structures. In undertaking a reflective immersive autoethnographic method, therefore, this research has underlined the importance of considering the ideological, subjective, and reflexive, even (and perhaps, especially) when engaging with affective responses to immersive media.

**Immersive-Affective Episteme**

Furthermore, by drawing on my immersive research journals, this thesis has highlighted the potential for knowledge to not only be created, but also accessed, via immersive experiences with interactive media. Immersion requires the player (or immersed researcher) to be invested – they perform ‘imagining’ (Juul, 2005) and are involved in the ‘active creation of belief’ (Murray, 1997: 110). In doing so, they open themselves to the affective experiences of that media. The ‘filling in’ (Steinberg, 2009) that people perform during their engagement with media occurs when gaming. Through reflecting on my immersive engagement with the games analysed during this project I have been able to recognise how this takes place. In noting the affective
experiences of gaming and considering how I am affectively interpellated by certain game structures. Throughout this thesis’ discussions, I used that affective knowledge to access the cultural moment. In practising an immersive method alongside qualitative content analysis, I was able to achieve analytic purchase on the cultural unconscious (Epstein & Steinberg, 2011: 90) by closely examining the feeling-knowledge regimes of affective gaming. This cultural episteme (Steinberg, 2015), accessible through immersive interaction in which the immersed researcher is engaged and open to being affected, could therefore also be thought of as a form of immersive-affective episteme.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this project investigated a set of games which are routinely dismissed as being low-brow, violent, juvenile and possibly dangerous. Whilst it did not seek to defend these games against such assertions, this thesis’ mapping of the persuasive and affective elements of gameplay structures revealed the contradictory quality of different strands of gameplay, as well as the player’s agency within and against these structures. More broadly, this thesis sought to make a contribution to knowledge by building on and extending the method of autoethnography through developing and testing a method which mobilises the concept of immersion in order to get critical purchase on the affective and experiential elements of gaming. It drew on discussions surrounding autoethnography, reflexivity, subjectivity, and objectivity, and brought the concept of immersive episteme into feminist methodologies. This thesis did not seek to revolutionise the field – personal experience is something which many who study media such as video games are already actively drawing upon. However, the immersive method has allowed me to make visible (and thus ‘codable’ and useful) my experiences of gameplay. As I highlighted in the opening of this thesis – due to their highly interactive nature, video games are an ideal medium with which to practise the immersive method. Yet the results of this research have implications for academic research more broadly in its ability to consider the close relationship between affect, immersion, experience, and knowledge.
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Glossary

AAA
AAA (‘triple A’) refers to a classification, or grading scale, of games. AAA titles can be thought of as equivalent to movie ‘blockbusters’. They usually have large development budgets and are widely promoted before and after release. Often bestsellers, they are expected to be of a high quality, however this ranking is not necessarily a marker of originality nor does it predict a positive critical reception.

Achievement hunting
Achievement hunting refers to a play style in which the player privileges unlocking achievements or trophies, increasing their Gamerscore (Microsoft) or Trophy levels (PlayStation).

Achievements
A meta-goal, ‘unlocked’ (achieved) by fulfilling certain set parameters or actions which are usually arbitrary and can range from completing specific missions, to performing an action a set number of times, to finding a secret. When unlocked, points (‘Gamerscore’ on Xbox, ‘Trophy levels’ on PlayStation) are awarded to the player and are tracked and displayed online via their ID (‘Gamercard’ on Xbox, PSN Profile on PlayStation).
‘Achievements’ in this thesis refers to both Microsoft’s achievement system and PlayStation’s trophy system.

Aggro
To ‘aggro’ an enemy is to alert them from a passive state into a more active form of combat.

Artificial Intelligence
Artificial intelligence (AI) in a video game context refers to the algorithms which govern intelligent behaviour in enemies and NPCs.

Avatar
(In a video game) a player character, often, in part, designed by the player.

Beat ‘em up
A video game genre which focuses on melee and hand to hand fighting.

Boss
A powerful and unique enemy, usually encountered at the end of the level. They are difficult to beat and often require a strategy.
| **Build** | Of a player character. Refers to the specific attributes the player has developed/invested in/purchased, leading to their specific strengths and weaknesses. Having an optimal build for a chosen playstyle can greatly increase the ease of combat and gameplay, whilst a poorly built character can make combat and gameplay more difficult. |
| **Bug** | A programming fault within the software of the game, and which causes the game to ‘glitch’ – to behave in an unintended or incorrect way. |
| **Chokepoint** | In military strategy, a chokepoint is a narrowing of a route that the enemy must take in order to reach their goal which will slow their movements and thus render them more vulnerable to attack. |
| **Easter egg** | An inside joke or intertextual reference, intentionally placed (and often hidden) in the gameworld. |
| **Experience points** | (XP) A unit of measurement. Awarded for specific actions (such as defeating enemies or completing quests) which quantify a player character’s progression. Usually, the accumulation of a set number of experience points allows the player to level up the player character, enabling them to become more powerful. |
| **First-person shooter** | Where the player occupies a first-person perspective (that is, they experience the action through the eyes of the player character) and in which the primary mechanic is based on projectile weapons such as guns or bows. |
| **Gamercard** | An online ID which displays various information about the player, including their Gamertag, avatar, reputation, Gamer Zone, Gamerscore, and recently played games. |
| **Gamerscore** | Points awarded for unlocking achievements on Xbox. Displayed as part of the player’s Gamercard. |
| **Gameworld** | The fictional and virtual world of a video game. |
| **Gaming the game** | Refers to when the player has a knowledge of certain mechanics and rules, manipulates them, and strives to achieve certain goals which may not be the goals dictated by the game. |
Sometimes the knowledge is about a specific bug or loophole which can be exploited for player benefit. Their actions are thus dictated by an knowledge of game processes and not by more intuitive interaction with the game.

**Glitch**
Describes when the game acts incorrectly or inconsistently due to a fault in the game software which results in errors. Occurs because of ‘bugs’.

**Haptic**
Relating to the sense of touch and tactile sensations, particularly using touch and proprioception to sense and manipulate objects.

**Heads-up display** (HUD) An overlay of data (such as a map, health statistics, ammunition counter, and so forth) on the screen.

**Immersant**
Refers to the person who immerses themselves/is immersed in the medium.

**In-game**
Refers to actions and events which take place within the gameworld.

**Kiting**
Refers to a combat style in which the player maintains distance from an attacking enemy such that they cannot be hurt by it. This allows for, among other things, the use of long range attacks (should the player character’s long range attack be longer in range than the enemies) or as a means of distracting the enemy whilst others attack on behalf of the player.

**Level up**
To level up is to progress the player character to the next stage, usually increasing their attributes and creating possibilities to use new abilities and upgrade existing ones. Levelling up is usually enabled by reaching a certain number of experience points.

**Ludic**
The game elements which constitute play.

**Mechanics**
The rules which determine player-game interaction, and thus determine gameplay. All video games have mechanics, whether simple or complex.

**Melee**
Refers to a close-quarters combat and can be the primary form of combat in a game or an option in a shooter.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Glossary Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metagame</td>
<td>Elements of the game which are outside of the game itself. This could include ‘walkthroughs’ (strategy guides), the achievement system, the PlayStation Network, player message boards, fan art, game criticism and so on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mini-boss</td>
<td>A powerful and often unique enemy, encountered on the approach to the more dangerous boss.</td>
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<tr>
<td>MMORPG</td>
<td>Massively multiplayer online role-playing games are online role-playing games in which players can play with others from around the world. The gameworld, usually hosted by publishers, often exist in the form of several ‘servers’ to cater to the large player populations and are usually linguistically and/or geographically demarcated. MMORPG gameworlds are ‘persistent’ (Bartle, 2003) in that they continue to exist even if no one is playing. The most popular MMORPGs can generate large revenues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modding</td>
<td>Modding describes when third-party ‘modders’ alter hardware or software. Often the new content they generate for pre-existing games is shared online within gaming communities. From the term ‘modify’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player character</td>
<td>Or ‘playable character’. Describes a video game character whose actions are controlled by the player, rather than the game. Can be similar to a film ‘protagonist’, yet differ in that, in some games, many players can play their individual player characters co-operatively. There might be several player characters throughout the course of one game. Can be human, animal, or object, but is always embodied. There is no player character in god games, for instance, in which the player is omniscient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playthrough</td>
<td>Refers to the playing of a game in its entirety – from start to finish. It can also refer to videos made for streaming services such as twitch and youtube in which players record or stream their playing through a game. In this thesis, I use the term in reference to the former meaning.</td>
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Quest

A task to be completed for a reward or for narrative progression. The term quest can imply main quest (activities which have to be completed in order to progress the narrative), as opposed to an optional sidequest.

Quick-time event

(QTE) A game mechanic whereby on-screen instructions prompt the player to perform a particular corresponding interaction with the interface in order for particular in-game events to successfully take place. A delay or incorrect interaction following the prompt often results in the failure of the intended action.

Role-playing game

(RPG) In digital gaming, a role-playing game is a genre which emphasises immersive and complex narratives, player choice, statistical and varied character development and levelling, and inventory management. The genre evolved from table-top role-playing games and contains many shared characteristics such as a simulated die-rolling to determine success or failure with attempted moves in combat.

Sandbox

An open-ended game in which minimal restrictions are placed on the player. Usually there is a large amount of exploration and self-direction (as opposed to a linear narrative structure).

Self-sanctions

Refers to the process by which people regulate their ethical actions. They are developed through the internalising of moral standards via socialisation. As the name suggests, self-sanctions are internally imposed and can be disengaged through various mechanisms (Bandura, 1990).

Shipping

To imagine and endorse a romantic relationship between characters that may not exist in the canonical narrative.

Shoot ‘em up

A shoot ‘em up is a subgenre of the shooter genre of games in which the player usually takes control of a vehicle, shooting large numbers of enemies.

Stealth

Describes a mechanic or game genre in which the player utilises stealth (by avoiding or distracting) to overcome enemies or avoid them altogether. It can be a mechanic used
alongside other active combat mechanics to give the player options, or can exist as a genre in its own right.

**Takedown**  
The act of defeating an opponent in one move using physical contact. Can be hand-to-hand or using a weapon (such as the butt of a rifle or a knife). Often prompted on-screen when certain parameters are met (i.e. being behind/close to the enemy, or having depleted a certain amount of their health already) and enacted by pushing a corresponding button.

**Third-Person Shooter** *(TPS)*  
Similar to FPS, except the player views the action from a third-person perspective relative to the player character. The camera usually occupies an over-the-shoulder perspective and is controllable within a limited range of movement (mostly rotating around the player character’s body).

**Trigger**  
The L2 and R2 buttons of a console controller, located around the back. Usually operated using the middle finger and often used to fire weapons.

**Trophies**  
PlayStation’s version of achievements.

**Unbalanced**  
Describes game mechanics which are tuned such that certain items, weapons or abilities are over- or under-powered compared to enemy strength. Unbalanced gameplay can result in combat which is too easy or difficult, and is thus no longer pleasurable.

**Vanilla**  
Describes the original version of a game at the time of its release, without any downloadable content (DLC), developer updates, or mods.

**Walkthrough**  
A strategy guide that ‘walks’ the player through the game, usually giving details such as enemy tactics, solutions for puzzles, locations of collectibles and so forth.