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The Subject of Games. Cartesian Anxiety in Game Cultures, Game Studies, and Gameplay

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Abstract
This article argues that game studies must directly confront the heretofore implicit conflict between different constructions of the human subject at the center of games research and criticism. The conception of a self-coherent and rational player is at odds with a relativistic notion of the player as a malleable surface of inscription, and this tension manifests as Cartesian anxiety. But both these constructions of the subject are bound to the figure of the *cogito* and thus to the present. Lacan's theory of the split subject is advanced as one possible way forward, as it postulates a thinking, reasoning subject that is nevertheless irreconcilably sundered from the libidinal and affective dimensions of its being. This theory of the subject is articulated to an approach to games analysis that centres gameplay, the agonistic interplay of forces animating players' engagement with games, and illustrated through a discussion of the public outcry around the release of *No Man's Sky* (2016) and its subsequent updates and patches.

Keywords: *Cogito*, Split Subject, Player Agency, Game Studies, Gameplay, Imperialism, gamevironments

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In both the public discourse surrounding the release of *No Man's Sky* (2016) and the scholarly discourse in game studies that implicates subjectivity we can witness parallel dramas playing out. While these discourses circulate among different publics, each at their own velocity, they both vacillate between a sense of certainty about how the subject is master of their own universe and the anxiety that threatens to undo this

edifice: the concern that the player is simply an object put in motion by the machinery of the game. This anxiety is not a problem in and of itself but rather because it deflects attention from a troublesome but fundamental construct of Western being, the Cartesian *cogito*.

Bernstein (1983) reads Descartes' (1637) *Discourse on the Method* as a rhetorical text fraught with doubt, uncertainty, and desire. While much of the Western philosophical tradition locates Descartes' (1637) *Discourse* as the inauguration of the modern, rational subject – the *cogito* – through the elimination of external and contingent sources of knowledge, in fact, Descartes' text illustrates a desperate effort to rationalize this subject by finding, even inventing, some foundation for it. In short, it demonstrates deep concern that there may be no foundation for the Reasoning subject at the very centre of the Enlightenment project. Bernstein (1983) coined the term *Cartesian anxiety* to explain this friction.

Lacan also addressed the phenomena of Cartesian anxiety, but in his thinking it resides at the very foundation of human subjectivity. One's identity and sense of self is premised on the Symbolic Other, on external forces and discursive frameworks, but the misrecognition of these externalities as fundamental attributes of one's character is endemic to human being. The products of this misrecognition are twofold. On the one hand, it enables sociality; a person enters social life by finding some footing, some purchase, in the symbolic universe. On the other hand, it simultaneously provokes an anxiety at the very origin of the subject. This is the "zero point of desire," the moment that inaugurates the drive for something unattainable, something that can fulfil the impossible need for completeness (Lacan 2006, 35).

This article examines two scenes of Cartesian anxiety and suggests a future for critical

scholars of games and gaming cultures. Cartesian anxiety is symptomatic of an unhealthy understanding of the subject as the self-coherent and rational agent of Modernity. Subsequently, this manuscript looks to the scholarly discourse in game studies on the topic of subjectivity and then to the public discourse around the release of *No Man's Sky*. In both cases there is a tension, more explicit in games culture and more implicit in game studies, between the self-assured presumption of a *rational* subject in control and the insurgent spectre of a *relational* subject who is constituted by and through others. It is my contention that, as a field, game studies must be more deliberate about how we understand the subject of games to escape what, according to her colleague Beverly Guy-Sheftall (2021), bell hooks calls the "imperialist white supremacist heteropatriarchy" of the present. To this end, I offer the split subject of Lacanian psychoanalysis as a potential model for games scholars to confront and interrogate some central conceits of the hegemonic Western subject.

The Subject of Games

For gamers and games scholars alike, the default conception of the subject of games – whether player, enthusiast, developer, journalist, etc. – is the *cogito*. Of course, figures of the self from behaviourism and various strands of posthumanism (e.g., new materialism, actor-network theory, agential realism, and cyborg theory, among others), also occupy a significant place in the public and scholarly discourse about players. Except for behaviourism, a staple of social-psychological studies of games and players which does not explicitly offer an ontology of players, these decentred theories of the subject are insurgent. They are introduced, by their proponents, as challenges to the hegemony of the liberal humanist subject of the *cogito*.

The Cartesian notion of the self is defined by pure interiority, and grounded in the

proposition that self-awareness is rooted only in one's own reflexive capacity. Often associated with the expression *cogito ergo sum*, this is a notion of self that is constituted of pure thought and disassociated from embodied experience. Descartes posited the *cogito* as "solely a mental existence," one that "produces the claim that all knowledge begins from the mind alone as its starting-point, a thinking substance that exists independently of any material conditions or bodily form" (Seigel 2005, 57). In addition, Descartes' notion of the self is characterized by a radical break from pre-modern theorizations of the self, which derived their understanding of the ultimate good from something outside: God or *kosmos*. Descartes rejected the representational adequacy of external ideas and inverts this relationship in order to position the rational self as the ultimate arbiter of cosmic order and worldly good (Taylor 1989, 129). In other words, reflexive, inward-focused thought is the basis for a stable self that turns outward to construct a knowledge sufficient to bring (a semblance of) order to the world. We can already see, in this brief sketch, the contours of the mental activities that define the enactment of the Cartesian *cogito*. Proceeding from a reflexive turn inward, which disavows the body, the *cogito* doubles back not to find a world of ideas and experiences, but to build and claim ownership of them.

Of course, the *cogito* is an incredibly problematic construct. As Kierkegaard (1844, 20) points out, it is a tautology. That is, because the proposition presumes an *I* that thinks, the claim to existence (*I am*) is redundant. The very utterance of the proposition *cogito ergo sum* violates the principle of non-contradiction, which has occupied a central place in Western formations of rationality, from Aristotle through Descartes and onwards to the present. But beyond the lack of coherence, the harmful impact of the Cartesian *cogito*, as a way of knowing (oneself), can be traced into many domains of everyday life. At its most mundane but also, perhaps, most insidious, the

cogito is very literally an ego-centric model of the self. After all, the *I*, in this formulation, replaces the role of the gods and of God, in archaic and Enlightenment era philosophy, respectively. Grosfoguel (2013, 75) writes, "for Descartes, the 'I' can produce a knowledge that is truth beyond time and space, universal in the sense that it is unconditioned by any particularity." In short, the *I* substitutes for the divine, assuming the neutral, objective position of a benevolent but unquestionable authority. Certainly in Donald Trump and his supporters we can observe the banal fascism of the self-obsessed. More potent than any confirmation bias, facts are dismissed as fictions and fictions enthroned as truths, so long as they confirm one's worldview. Who, then, could mount an objection to the will of the *cogito*?

As this example suggests, the *cogito* is entangled in something far greater than individual selfishness; its impact has consistently and persuasively been traced into and throughout the bedrock of the last 500 years of Western colonialism and imperialism. As Dussel (1996, 133) argues, the condition of possibility of the Cartesian *cogito* is the 150 years of European conquest in the Americas and elsewhere that preceded the *Philosophical Meditations*. To wit, only subjects who had conquered the (known) world could arrogate themselves to a position at the centre of the world (Dussel 1996, 133). In this line of analysis, the *cogito* is not the origin but rather one of several figures of an imperialist way of being. In it the Western subject has a template for performing personhood, and fulcrum to enable the erasure, marginalization, and oppression for others. Echoing Nietzsche's critique of European epistemologies, Ghandi explains how the *cogito* reduces "the unintelligible diversity and material alterity of the world to the familiar contents of our minds," which "opens up the possibility of ordering or taming the wild profusion of things formally" (Gandhi 1998, 36). This is to say, as a result of this definition of the human, the majority of the world's peoples have been relegated to unhuman status within colonial regimes and

the structures of coloniality that persist in the West and the former strongholds of colonial power in the Global South (Walcott 2014). In short, the *cogito* is a figure of the self and a way of knowing that enables a multitude of injustices, "from petty to genocidal violence" (Walcott 2014, 39).

It's likely because of, rather than in spite of this historical, cultural force that the *cogito* is a common trope for representing the subject in popular culture and public discourse (Voorhees 2008). As a later section endeavours to show, the *cogito* emerges as the undercurrent in the public outcry around *No Man's Sky*.

It is my contention that we require a different figure of the subject to enable incisive critique and meaningful engagement with games and game cultures alike and that Lacan's conceptualization of the split subject offers one potential model. Here, Lacan's split subject is particularly salient because it is premised on a crucial break with the Cartesian tradition. Lacan asserts that from the moment a person enters language they are irreconcilably divided, or split. He produces this fundamental insight by reading Freud's theory of the unconscious in relation to the Cartesian *cogito*: the self-certainty of the *cogito* (the *I am*) is not a reasoned and justified response to doubt (the *I think*) but rather it is an aegis, a response so strongly desired that it is made *real* by a linguistic proclamation (Žižek 1998, Dolar 1998). These two elements, the conscious that declares *I am* and the unconscious vexed by anxiety, though irreconcilable, constitute the subject as "irreducibly split between the ego and the unconscious" (Biesecker 1998, 223). And unlike the way that Freudian theory is employed in US American psychiatry, which posits a split between conscious and unconscious but ultimately seeks to unify the two, Lacan advocates working toward acceptance of the incommensurable gap between these domains. The split subject's imperative is to recognize that external impetus (and agency) that is constitutive of

the self. This has real, substantial implications for not only rethinking but reworking subject–object relationships around an ethical imperative to foster mutually sustainable relationships with the Other.

Lacan's (2006) theorization of the *mirror stage*, his first and arguably most often cited contribution to psychoanalytic theory, is invaluable to illustrating his conception of the subject. The infant sees a coherent image of themself in a mirror, an image that presents a pleasing fantasy of wholeness as an alternative to the disjointed fleshy blob the infant actually phenomenologically embodies. By misrecognizing (*méconnaissance*) themself in that reflection, the infant constructs an image of themself as unified, coherent, and in control. This image, the comforting and possibly empowering "armour," (Lacan 2006, 78) calcifies in order to protect the subject both from themself (and the Real traumas that cannot be articulated in language) and from society (and the sanctions that would follow violating Symbolic prohibitions). It is this "armour of alienating identity" that Lacan notes has been taken up as the "I," and which is often termed the "ego ideal" (Lacan 2006, 78).

We should be keen to also think about how players and media users relate to images on other screens such as film, television, and digital games. Through the process of identification (again, *méconnaissance*), these images, this something external, becomes the foundation of the *I*, placing the other's difference at the heart of identity. Identification with the other is fundamentally a misrecognition, a blind spot in one's awareness and thus the kernel of the unconscious, but it is simultaneously the grounding for a sense of self. A persona or image, this self is a fiction constructed out of the available symbolic resources. This *self*, the *I*, is also the seat of conscious thought and reason which, for Lacan, are also understood as Imaginary operations.

But the subject is the fantasy of the *I* and something more: it is the unconscious supplement of the conscious self. After all, the images that are the bases of identification and misrecognition do not arise from any pure nature, chance, or choice. Rather, they are the symbolic recourses made available in a given historical situation and as such they are linguistic: discourse, representation, and rhetoric. Butler (1997, 11) expresses as much when she writes, the subject, "ought to be designated as a linguistic category, a placeholder," because, "the subject is the linguistic occasion for the individual to achieve and reproduce intelligibility, the linguistic condition of its existence and agency." This framework enables scholars to distinguish between an extra-linguistic self and a subject positioned by the Symbolic within a socially, discursively constructed reality.

The *subject* exists in this split, and alienation from itself is the fundamental condition of the subject. Because this sense of *self* is premised upon and built around an aspect of exteriority misrecognized as interiority, the *I* is always already alien unto itself. *Contra* Descartes, the *I* is not transparent to itself, which means that the coherence, wholeness, and non-contradiction that Enlightenment thinking tends to ascribe to reason cannot be guaranteed. In Lacan's theorization, the self is originally and irrevocably split between a conscious self and an unconscious subject that is barred from recognizing how the desire of the Other is so essential to their very being.

This crucial distinction between one's sense of self, the *I*, and one's subject position, or subjectivity, enables us to move away from the Cartesian construct arrogated to the status of a universal by classical theories and models of democracy, economics, and society. It makes possible a future that can be revealed through critique that centers the libidinal (Brock 2020) and the erotic (Patterson 2020).

The split subject is one of several figures of the decentred subject – but in my estimation a particularly useful one for unthinking the *cogito* – to enable games research and criticism that acknowledges the messy reality of how games are taken up, played, and made meaningful. Neither an agent of their own sovereign will nor fully a product of circumstances and structures, the split subject provides a framework for thinking about how the relationship between player and game is overdetermined, enmeshed in a network of physical places, networked infrastructures, narrative and visual representation, thinking, and feeling. It forces us to recognize that neither studying games as text, platform, mechanics, or rules, nor studying players for their motivations, attitudes, creative actions, or community norms will effectively describe how player and game interface.

Cartesian Anxiety in Game Studies

The Cartesian anxiety endemic in academic discourse can be summed up by the question: do we study games (and how they play people) or do we study players (and how they play games)? This situation contains traces of the problematic of *objective/subjective knowledge* that manifests as Cartesian anxiety in the philosophy of science as well as the turmoil in game culture that *No Man's Sky* helped stir to the surface. To wit, the scholarly discourse of game studies is fraught with this anxiety, and diverges on the question of whether players are rational subjects or subject to the powerful effects of games.

It is most transparent in what has been described as the *game/player problem* and intersects with some discussions of agency in game studies (Voorhees 2013). This problem is only rarely openly debated in scholarly journals (c.f. Behrenshausen 2013) but rather manifests, implicitly, in the disconnect between the theories of the subject

that underwrite various scholarly approaches common in game studies. This is not a matter of the disaggregation of games research into distinct research communities but rather a disconnect that shows up in game studies as well as the games subfield of communication studies (Deterding 2017). Unfortunately, the implicit character of the tension compounds the problem by making it more difficult to address one another's arguments and what they mean for the substantive direction of this field (Ouellette and Conway 2020). Nevertheless, we can discern its contours by taking a step back to notice the forest rather than the trees. This allows us to observe the competing ontologies of the subject, different premises about how humans negotiate being and the very nature of subjectivity, that are organized by two distinct figures of the subject.

An agentic and self-coherent Cartesian subject can be identified in and across the only sometimes intersecting research areas described as player studies and active audience research. By and large, player studies conceives of games as platforms for players to construct their own experiences and meanings from their own play. Here we can find ethnographic analyses of players and even play communities, qualitative accounts of player agency, and critical-cultural studies of transgressive and activist play. Active audience studies tend to be more social-scientific, and particularly in the area of uses and gratifications research, rely on the self-reporting on the part of research subjects. And like player studies, this research emphasizes not what the game is doing to the player, but what players do with their games. From this we get a figure of the human subject that is not only fully conscious and aware of their thoughts and desires, but also empowered by this with the capacity for critical self-reflection. Figured in this way, the player as Cartesian subject transcends and ignores their experiential context, rendering the game irrelevant.

Another prominent paradigm in game studies is organized around a determined subject shaped by social structures and other circumscribing forces. Unlike the *cogito*, this subject is shaped by contexts and other agents, including the games they play. This subject is evident in cultural studies of games in which ideologies and even machinic ways of thinking are transferred to the player. It is evident in posthumanist approaches, including actor network theory, new materialism and agential realism, that position the player as one of many agencies at play in games. It is further manifest in the body of media effects research that examines how players are affected by the games they play. Even absent an explicit theory of the subject, we see players treated as the malleable surface of inscription, and gameplay is how players are written. Analyses of the production of militarist and androcentrist subjects occupy the same conceptual territory as studies of aggression modeling and pro-social skill development. These studies tell us that the player is an empty vessel with no coordinates, neither a vector to pursue nor a position to maintain, except that which is provided by the game. In fact, in this view games more closely resemble Cartesian subjects able to shape the world to their image.

Surveying this landscape, Schulzke (2012) describes an opposition between voluntaristic and deterministic understandings of human agency. I build from this to argue we can better understand the state of the discourse as an expression of Cartesian anxiety by thinking about how the game-player problem intersects with the question of how we understand human subjects. This requires working against the silences and gaps in the discourse of the field that have keep notions of the subject from coming into direct relation (Quellette and Conway 2020).

When we do see games scholars engage with subjectivity they rehearse Cartesian anxiety. This is the case in Shaw's (2015) watershed work, *Gaming at the Edge*, which

examines theories of identification and makes rather strong commitments to a deconstructed figure of the subject as one that is made legible and given life by the confines of language and representation. However, despite explicating how and why representation in games matters to marginalized players Shaw also accepts at face value her informants' testimony that representation does not, in fact matter. On one hand Shaw's fidelity to her informants is admirable and demonstrates strong commitment to honouring the experiences of the subaltern. And yet, it is also premised on a Cartesian construction of the subject as a self-coherent (rather than contradictory), thinking (rather than affective), and transparent (rather than illusory or obfuscated) sovereign of their own self. By empowering her informants at the expense of her theoretical frameworks, that is by bracketing and setting aside the operation of the unconscious to presume that the players are not only capable of an unclouded recollection but also objective reflection, Shaw demonstrates Cartesian anxiety.

Another striking example of engagement with the concept of subjectivity that displays Cartesian anxiety can be found in Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric and his unit operation approach to games criticism. In his work on unit operations, Bogost (2006, 107) highlights the importance of the "simulation gap," which "constitutes the core representation of simulation, between the work's rules and its reception." Bogost suggests that players work through the "simulation anxiety," produced by the gap between the rules of the model and their own subjective knowledge, by "learning how to express what simulations choose to embed and to exclude" and, with a nod to Alan Badiou, calls those who ponder the simulation gap "subjects" (Bogost 2006, 109). For who can think through this simulation gap but the sovereign, reasoning subject of the *cogito*? As Bogost (2007, 217, 230) makes clear in *Persuasive Games*, the subject that navigates the "simulation gap" is a reasoned and

conscious thinker who interrogates their self, reflexively. In short, the subject of Bogost's theorizing emerges from and overcomes the doubt and uncertainty of the "simulation gap" through the application of reason, much like the American psychoanalytic tradition suggests the subject can be rendered whole. This formulation stages and attempts to resolve Cartesian anxiety by positioning the subject of reason as the hero that transcends chaos.

Others work from the *cogito* as their starting point, as Keogh (2018) does in order to delineate a phenomenology of play in *A Play of Bodies*. Keogh (2018, 6) presents his theory as a response to Cartesianism as "the certain ground of videogame theory: an effortless transferal of agency into a virtual world to take on a virtual body, an ultimate transcendence historically marketed by publishers and desired by players that leaves the carnal meat behind." Drawing from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Hayles' posthumanism, and Haraway's cyborg theory, Keogh posits the embodied experience of play emerges from the distribution of perception, action, and even consciousness throughout the cybernetic circuit formed between player and game. Ultimately, he champions the cyborg figure, contrasting it to the liberal rational subject of the hacker, as one the renders legible "videogame experience as an embodied textuality that flickers across actual and virtual world as a play of bodies" (Keogh 2018, 192). But, ruminating on Sudnow's account of playing Atari's Breakout, he puts emphasis on how the player is incorporated into the rhythms, posture, and movement "required by the videogame" (Keogh 2018, 32). And here, Cartesian anxiety returns in Keogh's analysis, which simultaneously holds the players is not "in charge" of a game's systems but "assimilated into them" and also that "I make choices … against the affordances and constraints" of the game (Keogh 2018, 173). Who is this *I* that acts both within and *against* the cyborgian loop but the spectre of the autonomous, thinking subject?

Cartesian anxiety is the very platform from which Wilde (2023, 5) departs in *Posthuman Gaming*, where a key starting point is the "tension between this reliance on an 'other' and the desire to see the self as individual." Rejecting both the rational subject of liberal humanism and the cyborg as primarily a way of extending or evolving the capacities of this subject, Wilde argues for Karan Barad's theory of agential realism and theorizes play as intra-action. Fizek (2022, xxi) makes a similar move in *Playing at a Distance*, arguing that "agency is not a property possessed by a human player but a force distributed within and across the ludic entanglement." Following analyses of automated and ambient play, and starting from the position that the presupposition of the player and game as two separate and distinct entities is a critical part of the Cartesianism dominant in public and scholarly games discourse, Fizek's (2022, 76) account of play as intra-action concludes by noting the agency of the apparatus to "regulate the player's behaviour in a desired fashion." Similarly, in Wilde's (2023, 102) analysis of playful intra-action, the player's agency emerges from narrative, mechanical, and hardware constraints, that is from the agency of a plethora of other human and non-human actors. In these explorations of the mutual constitution of player and game, the agential capacity of the player either disappears into determinism or is dispersed and rendered opaque and illegible.

As a scholarly field game studies lacks a robust theory of the subject that can account for the relationships woven by and through players, game cultures, and games. To enable critical examination of this we require a theory of the subject that is diffuse, open to contradiction and externalities, but not so relativistic that we presume the subject can be (re)inscribed by any discourse. In short, game studies must overcome its Cartesian anxiety and come to terms with an even more challenging reality: it is not the case that the subject is either self-coherent or lacking a foundation, but rather that the subject is both self-coherent and lacking a foundation. To wit, we must deal

with a sovereign, thinking subject whose very sovereignty is premised on externalities, contexts, and knowledges that resist conscious thinking. Thankfully, the messy interplay of different agencies in the making of gameplay experience is not an entirely new premise in game studies.

Cartesian Anxiety in Game Cultures

To illustrate the utility of games criticism that starts from such a theory of the subject, this section confronts the Cartesian anxiety in both the game-player problem in game studies and the existential crisis in game cultures provoked by *No Man's Sky*. I argue that an orientation to gameplay is a necessary counter to the game-player problem and its silent bifurcation of the field. It enables critics to consider what happens at the intersection of the symbolic and materials structures of a digital game and the embodied, material performances of culturally situated players. It also enables a more nuanced reading of the outcry around *No Man's Sky* that suggests a way forward that doesn't involve attempting to heal that split but rather accepting it.

After years of anticipation from gaming enthusiasts, starting from the very first reveal of the game at the 2013 Video Game Awards, British game developer Hello Games released *No Man's Sky* in August 2016. Touted by the Hello Games (2016) website as a "science-fiction game about exploration and survival in an infinite procedurally generated universe," *No Man's Sky* was eagerly anticipated by gaming enthusiasts. When a reporter broke the story that the game's March 2016 release would be delayed, fans sent death threats to the reporter. And when Hello Games confirmed this delay two days later, fans sent death threats to the developers too. The game's release was ultimately polarizing with many consumers satisfied while others were left frustrated, producing a notable rhetorical moment in which the game was both

widely extolled and condemned.

In the aftermath, the humour website *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* published a satirical article, "The Implicit Existential Drama in *No Man's Sky* Reviews," composed of sentences taken from reviews published in twelve different venues (Carmichael 2016). The satire is premised on the disparity of opinions about the game and emerges through the juxtaposition of comments to form a dialogue. What is highlighted in this piece is not the debates over what features Hello Games promised would be included in the game and to what extent they were delivered, but rather the way the *No Man's Sky* functions as a representative anecdote for the Cartesian anxiety that is imbricated in digital games and game cultures but also infests academic and industry discourses of games.

No Man's Sky is praised for its concessions to the subject constituted as *cogito*. According to quotes from various media outlets collated in Carmichael (2016), it leaves one "free to tell your own story, however you want" and to find "depth were there had been none." And it is "cool because [the player chooses] where to go and [the player chooses] what to build," and it entertains the player with "endless splendor" (Carmichael 2016). And at the same time *No Man's Sky* is condemned for failing to enable the fantasy of the *cogito*; regardless of the player's actions it "ends up feeling like a vast universe where nothing really happens or matters," in which the "stakes are very low," and the excitement of the adventure quickly becomes "monotonous and dreary" (Carmichael 2016).

But, again, the discourse of *No Man's Sky* reviews is not only a defense of the *cogito* but an expression of the games communities' fraught, frustrated relationships to Cartesian figures of the subject.

There is a crosscurrent in the discourse that stresses the importance of the Other, the symbolic universe within which the linguistic and mechanical context of play are situated. After all, some reviews (Carmichael 2016) celebrate *No Man's Sky* for "demanding a great deal" of its players, instilling a "sense of mystery," and imbricating players in the making of the "collective knowledge of the universe." Here, the discourse is premised on play that is shaped, and ultimately determined by the game qua object. It is also evidenced when *No Man's Sky* is critiqued for "the repetitive nature of the gameplay itself" and poor design whose "overarching goals were so obviously an afterthought" (Carmichael 2016). That players lose "faith that [*No Man's Sky*] had any more meaningful things to show me no matter how far I traveled," and seek "something with more purpose… and more design" point to the gravity attributed to the symbolic structure of the game (Carmichael 2016).

Just barely obscured beneath the *cogito*'s demand for a game that gives free reign to players is the unconscious' demand that the symbolic structure of the game – its rules governing goals, possible actions, and procedures – will nonetheless impose a determinate structure upon play. There is a strong fetishization of the "sandbox" in which a player can do as they please, ignoring the game's goals and imposing their own upon the game's "open world" (Carmichael 2016). Here is a phallocentric figure of not only penetration and mastery, but control over the very structures of the game. After all, the "manipulation rules," the rules that regulate what actions players may take and to what effect, are not altered (Frasca 2003, 232). Rather, by imposing their own mandate the player wrests the system of rules from their inertia and turns them to their own ends. Players, the community even, desire to prolong the game's staging of the fantasy of the *cogito*. And still, there is also a strong stance that *No Man's Sky* should be more like other AAA games and feature an expansive world (or galaxy) but still deliver clear goals and other motivational structures to encourage the player's

investment in the game. Players, collectively and unconsciously, are also driven to the exhaustion of the Cartesian fantasy.

In this tumultuous and sometimes violent discourse, games culture announces its Cartesian anxiety, blurting out: do I play the game or does the game play me? But, this is a false binary. And as Lacan informs us, it is sustained by the misrecognition of what is at stake. The question of whether the player or game is the locus of control while gaming is not up for grabs. The *cogito* that plays to bring their ideas into being exists alongside the unconscious that seeks the guidance of objectives, narration, and designed storytelling. This is the case with NMS and, indeed, most gaming.

To wit, the pertinent question is how can players best navigate the economy of forces constituting the interface between the player's psychic, sociological, and material contexts of play and the game's discursive, sensorial, and psychological stimulus? Because the collective inability on the part of mainstream North American games cultures to accept and learn to productively negotiate the tensions of both player and game has to change. The violence and domination authorized by the *cogito* cannot be quantified, but the harassment and violence toward games workers that the discourse around *No Man's Sky* typifies – and which we can also see in discourses responding to *Fallout 3* (2008), *Mass Effect 3* (2012), and more recently *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) – is intolerable.

On first blush the case of *No Man's Sky* seems like the ideal moment for player studies, but this analysis of Cartesian anxiety provoked by *No Man's Sky* is far from complete. By only thinking about it as a moment where players simultaneously attacked and celebrated a newly released game, we miss the chance to more fully understand the relation between players and games. That is, by treating it solely as a

matter of players acting out a Cartesian anxiety, we not only overlook how the affordances and constraints of the game, *No Man's Sky*, motivated that response, we also risk losing sight of how the game developed and was reconfigured in response to this player discourse. Further, by ending the analysis here we would simply be restating the premise by gesturing to the split subject manifest in games culture. We need to investigate how those faults and rifts are configured in this controversy so developers and critics can better respond the next time something like this happens. The discourse around the release of *No Man's Sky* needs to be studied in the context of gameplay.

Cartesian Anxiety in Gameplay

The notion of gameplay at work in this final section is grounded in two distinct but reconcilable premises. The first emerges in tandem with the deconstructed figure of the subject advanced previously, and points to the necessity of the libidinal, erotics, and other affective modes analysis and critique. In his ground-breaking study of Black technocultures, Brock (2020) centers libidinal economy because the dominant methods of studying how people use technologies, which push affect to the periphery or elide it altogether, employ the logics of and reproduce white supremacy. He examines the joy and angst that undergirds Black digital practices, and points to the pleasures and anxieties activated in the assertion of white racial ideology. Vitally, Brock (2020, 221) argues that "our understandings of time, space, and sociality are never exempt from libidinal or mythic beliefs about them; they are inescapably informed by them." As Patterson (2020, 16) writes, "all games engage the erotics of the body – pleasure, desire, sensation, bliss." Sex and sexuality need not be explicitly thematized in games or game cultures for the force of desire – to possess, control, violate, dominate – to manifest. Working through erotics as method, Patterson is able

to foreground how race is implicated in strategic and economized modes of play and how games can facilitate reparative forms of relationality by sublimating fear, foreboding, and other emotions that stymie change with pleasure. By centering the force of affect, the excess that does not undermine but frames thought and reason, Brock and Patterson make visible a future capable of resisting the racist and heteropatriachal present.

The second and more germane to game studies is the observation that the relationships between players and games is fundamentally complex but in no way so dense that it cannot be unpacked. This has previously been thematized. We can see it emerging in Taylor's (2009, 331) short study of the "assemblage of play," in which she argues for refiguring the activity of play as an assemblage of human and machine efforts. Perhaps a boon of Taylor's ethnographic attention to the social, material, and technological contexts of phenomenological experience, her conception of play as assemblage requires the analyst to "pay attention to a number of parts interwoven in complex ways at particular historical moments" (2006, 332). Of course, this is difficult; games are complex systems even before we expand the circuit of that system to include players. But Taylor's analysis of social life in MMOs does just that. From her extensive discussion of power gaming to the brief vignettes about patterns of social interactions around buffing and teleporting, Taylor explicates the socio-technical apparatus organized by MMOs and players.

Likewise, Seth Giddings and Helen Kennedy's masterful paper analyzing their own experience playing *Lego Star Wars* (2005) moves between concerns about aesthetics, identification, non-human agents, and death, all while keeping gameplay centered. Their analysis emerges from a careful consideration of how the "heterogeneous engineering of bodies, minds, algorithms, avatars and actions" contributes to an

experience of gameplay that is both cognitive and sensual (Giddings and Kennedy 2008, 30). This becomes a prerogative in Jaakos Stenros and Annika Waern’s (2011) methodological intervention, which argues that game scholars should investigate “games as activity” (2011, 11). Beginning from the proposition that privileging the game as system marginalizes the study of play, they argue for looking at the “consciously structured” game in relation to the “enacted experience” of play (Stenros and Waern 2011, 4).

But efforts to theorize this decentering of players have, rather than hold player and game in dialectic, centered games. For instance, Galloway (2006, 5) argues that both operator acts and machine acts are essential to understanding gameplay. Unfortunately, Galloway (2006, 1) is more interested in the machine acts than the player’s. Perhaps that is why the chapter in his book on the matter is called “Gamic Action: Four Moments,” despite two of those moments describing player actions (Galloway 2006, 1). Bogost gestures to a similar notion in his 2009 keynote, *Videogames are a Mess*, where he argues for a “slutty ontology” that demands critics and scholars take seriously the ontic status of game elements. However, Bogost’s intervention is a bit too much like Galloway’s: the effort is aimed at encouraging game studies to be more mindful of the operations of the non-human actors – the platform, code, silicon wafer, and operational logic. Posthuman approaches, such and Wilde (2023) and Fizek (2022), repeat this problem. While decentering the player is a valuable and important contribution to games research, the price – the risk of abandoning analysis of player agency, either to the agency of others or by diffusing it such that agency is impossible to trace – is too much to bear. Keever’s (2022) intervention is vital to this point. Actor-network theory, object-oriented ontologies, agential realism, and other posthuman approaches claim to displace power and ideology by dispersing agency through complex assemblages of human and non-

human actors, but "a modern method of Ideological critique does not posit preexisting subjects, it details the creation of those subjects within a material apparatus: as such, positing that agency is distributed between humans and nonhumans simply points us back at the problem of Ideology" (Keever 2022, para. 17). To wit, these decentered ontologies of gameplay neglect to specify how various external agencies delimit the terrain of player agency, centering the game at the cost of studying players.

Beyond this problem, there is one further step to take, which is to expand the boundaries of the player–game interface to include the whole complex of desires, apprehensions, and tensions animating players. Unmaking this boundary of what counts as play does not arise from nowhere. Chris Paul's (2011) analysis of theorycrafting in *World of Warcraft* (2004), wherein players analyze the game in order to optimize strategy, identifies this activity as an aspect of gameplay. Daniel Ashton and James Newman (2012, 227) take a similar position when they discuss game walkthrough documents as part of a "dialogical relationship between the on- and off-screen spaces of gameplay", which is not a far cry from Newman's (2012, 24) argument that "gameplay is surrounded by and suffused with talk."

But it is likely that no one has done more to reimagine the boundaries of gameplay than Mia Consalvo (2007), whose monograph, *Cheating*, challenged the conventional thinking that anchors play to the manipulation of software. Consalvo (2007, 176) makes a compelling case for understanding that "gameplay doesn't exist in a vacuum," grounded in an insightful examination of how games magazines and strategy guides shape player culture and play practices. This move to expand the bounds of play finds theoretical justification in Consalvo's (2007) critique of the concept of the "magic circle," the construct of "temporary worlds within the ordinary

world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" within which games are played, originally proposed by Johan Huizinga (1955, 10) in his foundational work, *Homo Ludens*. Consalvo argues that the differentiated spheres of activity Huizinga took for granted are no longer productive conceptual categories in post-modernity. Drawing attention to how gameplay is imbricated with players "real lives, with real commitments, expectations, hopes, and desires," Consalvo posits that "there is no innocent gaming" (2007, 415).

It is increasingly clear that while the experience of acquiring knowledge about a game or game genre, and the work of learning a game's rules and becoming socialized to its community of players is can be *analytically* distinguished from the activity of gameplay (after all, it occurs in distinct place), there is no justification for neglecting or marginalizing, much less excluding, this from the *phenomenological* experience of gameplay. A future-oriented game studies must work to recognize that players' "commitments, expectations, hopes, and desires" (Consalvo 2007, 415) are a not just a frame or context for gameplay but a part of the very patterns of activity that constitute gameplay.

Ultimately, game studies needs a theory of gameplay that decenters the player without centering the game, that recognizes the agency of game developers and the narrative structures, mechanical possibilities, and representational economies they embed in the game as well as the knowledge, experiences, dispositions, and motivations that players bring to the interface. Voorhees (2013) proposed such a theory of gameplay that, starting from Salen and Zimmerman's (2003, 66-67) description of games as "spaces of possibility" and Foucault's (2003, 16-17) explanation of agency as action within a predetermined "field of possibilities" as the "site where the game and player contest each other's capacity to structure and give

meaning to their ongoing interfacing." This theorization and approach to gameplay is consonant with Lacan's split subject and, therefore, the subject of games. It centers the activity of play without downplaying the actions, affects, and thinking originating from both sides of the interface that structure – without determining – the player's agency.

Analysing the discourse around the release of *No Man's Sky* through the split subject and the momentarily enacted but ultimately unresolved activity of gameplay means taking into account how that discourse took its specific form in response to the form of the game, and further to this, how this moment constitutes just one moment in the continued interfacing of these players and the game. It means taking seriously the erotics of play and the libidinal economy animating players' paradoxical demands for both an open-world playground and structures to give shape and meaning to their play experience, as well as the continued development of *No Man's Sky* in response to these demands.

Upon its release, *No Man's Sky* was a sandbox game with some loosely defined objectives and, given its procedural content generation, heightened potential for exploration and discovery. As a genre, sandbox games tend to eschew structured objectives and instead present players with open-ended worlds and the ability to play in ways that facilitate different experiences (Wysocki 2018). The player is "given free rein in a world where there is little or no plot to drive gameplay; the gameplay emerges from the tools and the world you're in" (Coldeway 2011). In this context, Wysocki's (2018) argument that the outcry over *No Man's Sky* failed to appreciate the most unique and challenging facet of the game, that fundamentally, "*No Man's Sky* is self-directed play" can only be a partial explanation.

We should also ask, how did *No Man's Sky* facilitate emergent gameplay and narrative? What tools and building blocks, both configurative and representational, were there to stimulate emergence? And the answer is: not very much. At least in comparison to the genre standard, *Minecraft* (2011), which had received eight major content updates between its official release in November 2011 and Summer 2016. In fact, players found so little to enable emergent gameplay in *No Man's Sky* that complaints alleging false advertising were filed with and an investigation conducted by the UK-based Advertising Standards Authority. Among the complaints, players alleged that the developers promised but didn't deliver procedurally generated features including planetary structures, large-scale planetary battles, and behaviours of hostile and non-hostile mobs. However, the developer was able to prove these features did, in fact, exist; they are just incredibly infrequent and unlikely to be encountered by any one player (Crecente 2016). Separately, fans left negative reviews and complained about the lack of any significant multiplayer aspect, which they argued was suggested in multiple developer interviews. These challenges took place in the twin contexts of players' expectations given the genre and players' experiences of the actual game.

It is clear that players found the game lacking. Indeed, so did the developers at Hello Games. Shortly after the Advertising Standards Authority complaints were resolved the Foundation Update was released, which introduced base construction, farming as a complement to mining, freighters, field equipment for planetary deployment, as well as new plant, resource, and tool types. This was followed by the Path Finder update that expanded base customization options, enabled players to own and customize multiple spacecraft and to upgrade and select specializations for tools and weapons, in addition to introducing multiple kinds of planetary vehicles, new shops and merchants. A year after *No Man's Sky*'s initial release, the Atlas Rises update

added a story driven campaign, finally providing players with the structure some had so fervently demanded at launch. It also added more building blocks for potential emergent narrative: a new tool option that enables modifying terrain, new planetary biomes and exotic planet types, new spacecraft options, and a new ad hoc mission system tied to NPC guilds, as well as overhauls to the galactic regions and interstellar trading systems.

What all this activity from Hello Games points to is the interaction between player and game. And not just in the developer's focus on multiplying the possibility space of the game by expanding the range of manipulation rules and affordance for players to. We also see how the game, as a representative of a genre, exists within a set of expectations and even enables a specific kind of interaction, or response. And then how further iterations on that game are incited by player discourse. Like developers prompted to redo the final cinematic to appease fan outrage (e.g., *Fallout 3* [2008] and *Mass Effect 3* [2012]), this is an instance where players utilize their agency to influence the developer (Stang 2019). The news releases Hello Games issued at the time suggest as much, and the announcement for the Atlas Rises update reads: "it's been a year since *No Man's Sky* first released, and it's been an exciting, intense and emotional year for us at Hello Games. We have been quiet, but we have been listening intently" (Hello Games 2017). Indeed, the developer remained quiet as the discourse unfolded but replied to players' concerns very loudly at regular intervals with several major updates and more than twenty patches in the first year alone.

However, it is imperative to recognize two things. First, that this form of agency is much more diffuse than these examples. The three big first-year *No Man's Sky* updates, the eight *Minecraft* updates, and all those that have previously and/or subsequently been released for these games, and all other games in fact, are also

products of this dimension of player engagement. This form of player agency is so common in game cultures that it is easy to overlook, though more often it is conceptualized as part of the labour of game development (c.f. playbour or prosumption) rather than an aspect of play or interaction. Second, and following from this, we cannot afford to normalize the vitriolic player rhetorics enacted in the most spectacular examples of this form of player agency. We need to recognize the violent and coercive discourse for what it is, the expression of the imperialist white-supremacist heteropatriarchal tendencies of the *cogito*. And with this recognition another, which studying griefers, misogynists, and racists has already suggested, that not every demonstration of player agency deserves celebration. And we can add this correlate: the *cogito* is an organizing principle of some of the most relentlessly selfish, agentic, and oppressive player actions.

Conclusions

This article outlines the distinction between the *cogito*, posthuman figures of the decentred self, and the split subject of Lacan. It, furthermore, makes a case for how Cartesian anxiety, the inability to think through the contradictions at the foundation of the rational and self-coherent subject of Western modernity, and subsequent refusal to acknowledge the split subject, shows up in both the game-player discourse in game studies and the rhetoric around *No Man's Sky* in games culture. As an intervention in the scholarly discourse, the split subject provides a framework for doing critical game studies. By engaging rather than sidestepping the silent, implicit debate between approaches that presume either a Cartesian or a thoroughly decentered or determined figures of the subject, we are encouraged to do games research that is relational and to see both games and players as agentic, each stimulating, inciting, and compelling the other. This enables us to push beyond the

game-player debate and focus on gameplay, that is on games as a dynamic facet of the life-worlds and experiences of players, rather than formal, ontological or deterministic structures.

And as this article demonstrates, the benefit of games criticism that regards the subject to be both rationally self-coherent and relationally constituted is the clearer urgency and refined capability to interrogate the socio-cultural dynamics of gameplay. From this vantage, the analysis of *No Man's Sky* and the public discourse about it reveals how the game is invested with players' fantasies of power and domination as well as hopes to lose themselves in the narratives and worlds shaped by others, resonating with broader cultural currents respectively perpetuating and resisting Western imperialism. It also draws attention to the impact – both on the game and as it resonates through public culture – of the intellectual and discursive labour of players and its mutually constitutive relationship with the creative and material labour of developers in the games ecosystem consisting of, among other things, the games industry, games journalism, participatory culture, and media regulation. These orientations and abilities are vital for a game studies able to challenge imperialist white-supremacist heteropatriarchy.

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