

# **I play, therefore I am**

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## **Abstract**

The experience of digital game-play reemphasizes the paradox of identification for a generation without an existential conflict. First-Person-Games are paradigmatic for this issue since consciousness is addressed directly in their representational setting. This paper provides a speculative analysis of the “No Russian” level of the military ego-shooter CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2 by Infinity Ward from 2009. I approach the connection between the very paradox of the identification process with the ontology of digital games on three levels: First I will examine the doubling of consciousness described by Roger Caillois’ metaphor of the mask. Then, I will analyze the speculative function of violence in the very dialectic process in providing self-consciousness within the media of computer games. And finally, I will detail the close interrelation between action and reflection, which I will refer to as ‘Performative Reflection’. The final point of Performative Reflection suggests a rephrase of René Descartes cogito argument for a generation of gamers.

**Keywords:** Computer Games, First-Person-Games, Paradox in Game-Play, Subjectivity, Lacan, Bateson, Caillois, Hegel, Bataille, Camus, Performative Reflection

*“The play's the thing,” says Hamlet, “wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.”* Albert Camus

## **Introduction**

Subjectivity has always been one of the driving fields of interest in cultural goods of any kind. The entire conflict between the “I” and the “World” unfolds in this single philosophical term. The tension it provokes is the very reason for the human to act with and within the world. Whether in art, philosophy or mass media, subjectivity also plays a crucial role in computer games: here the confrontation with one's own being becomes the very engine driving the aesthetical experience. One needs to be charged with “Selfness” in order to give artificiality an access to reality. But like in every generation so also does the dualism between subject and object find a specific expression in the “age of computer games” (Claus Pias), to which the following paper is dedicated.

A lot has been written and spoken in Game Studies about how computer games involve the player into their artificial worlds. One speaks of “participation” or of the relationship between “interactivity” and “immersion”. But media scholars often overlook that it is the very nature of aesthetics<sup>1</sup> to eat their victims alive. Whether looking at a painting of Van Gogh, reading the Bible or listening to silence, in the mode of self-reflexive awareness the content points beyond its object and carries the observer to places which never existed and that will never exist. To say it with the words of Friedrich Schiller:

“Only by concentrating the whole energy of our spirit in one single focus, and drawing together our whole being into one single power, do we attach wings, so to say, to this individual power and lead it artificially beyond the bounds which Nature seems to have imposed upon us.” (Schiller 1795, 1965: 44)

In order to capture the attention of the subject, the machine has to make him an offer that he cannot knock out: to identify himself within the artificial world, because like Schiller already noticed:

“Only through the succession of its perception does the persisting ego itself come to appear.” (ibid.: 62)

The question of identity is a fundamental problem, since it drives us into the aesthetic experience. Without a precise notion of subjectivity through a thoughtfully constructed process of identification, there is no illusion of improvisation or agency in game-play. Consequently this paper is not interested in a mere representation of the “ego” in digital games, but rather in approaching the very immediate movement of subjectivity: How does it arise out of the paradox routed in game-play? How does negation affect the dialectical movement in the case of a digital game? And what are the inscribed consequences for the process of thought?

It has to be noted that this paper needs to take a highly speculative approach in order to grasp the onto-metaphysical power the nature of subjectivity provides in digital game-play. One should not underestimate the closeness of digital games to literature and theater: computer games are indeed event machines! In order to bring experience and analysis together one has to take risks. Borders can only be crossed within a safe-playful mindset if the extremes are emphasized to their maximum. Games deal with the ambiguity of their very structure and virtual unfolding. Therefore subjectivity is driven by the open framework of games and their possibility to create “events”, which, at a certain point, confront us with our own disempowerment. Speculative thinking has the strength in providing tools to grasp the very movement between being in control and losing control we love so much in devoting ourselves to video games. Therefore I wish to invite you to join me on a journey of “speculative fantasy” (Manfred Frank).

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “aesthetic“ in the sense of Aisthesis, which stands for towards harmony striving perception. I am referring to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who introduced this term to philosophy in his *Meditationes* from 1735.

## The experience of identification

Jaques Lacan developed his theory of the mirror stage (Lacan 1946, 1966) in the early 1940s, which provides a strong picture of the psychological self-consciousness. The existential shock Lacan describes in his theory, in which the subject suffers from in the moment of noticing himself as the object for the Other, found a true mediated equivalent in digital games. Lacan's theory of subjectivity is especially suitable for analyzing computer games since his semantic construction of the psyche implements the fuzzy-polycontextual logic of the insolvable paradox, as described by the German philosopher Gotthard Günther in his famous work *Idee und Grundriss einer nicht Aristotelischen Logik* from 1959. Lacan's triad of the imaginary-symbolic-real expands the dualisms of "id" and "super-ego" of the Freudian apparatus with the instance of the "real". Therefore it is much more suitable for the logical conditions of the computer age than for the Freudian imagination of the human psyche as a steam-engine.

The German cultural scientist Mark Butler proposed to use Lacan's mirror stage with the system of symbolic order for a cybernetic understanding of computer games. According to Butler, the human is always bound within Lacan's triad of the symbolic-real-imaginary when playing with computers. Lacan thought the relationship between symbolic and real in terms of an information-theoretical understanding of the signal and its undifferentiated noise. Therefore every symbolization in the process of playing a computer game, which means every formulation of the real, has to be understood as an act of violence, meaning a form of negation in the dialectic process. Consequently every notion of the real refers beyond the synchronized symbolic system. (Butler 2007: 171) The gap missing in the acknowledgment of subjective reality exceeds the system of reality in the cybernetic process of meaning creation. At the one hand the real does not exist and on the other it grounds the whole system ontologically. In it the real confronts the player with the facticity of time and his finiteness, meaning his death, and makes itself noticeable in the imagination of a perfect fantasy. Therefore the symbolic order for Lacan is the foundation of an understanding of intersubjectivity, in this case with the algorithmic machine. Here the "I" is the "Other". In order to approach this "Other" the player has to give away his sovereign existence, has to accept and welcome the expenditure and the meaningless loss of his time and therein take the risk of losing himself.

The player has to objectify himself in order to become part of the digital game, meaning to identify himself in acting and thinking within the algorithmic world. He has to re-experience the Cartesian Paradigma in the aesthetic experience of game-playing through his own imagination of his embodiment in order to prove himself as real in this world by overcoming it. The diremption of the subject is visible by a fine interplay between the imagination of a camera, the simulated view, and the avatar, the view of the Other, found in every video game. It provokes a circle of desire between both poles, in which the desire of coming into being can manifest. But Lacan's later declared ontological power of the view also becomes present. (Lacan 1964, 1978) It forces the player and the avatar to create each other in the context of their reality. Both see and are seen at the same time. For this very reason the process of identification finds a clear symbolic value: While we are playing we observe ourselves playing. In this sense computer games become mirrors of subjective development.

But what about immediate identification? I would suggest that immediate identification is still one of the biggest challenges for game designers. I do not use the term “identification” in the sense of empathy, but in the sense of immediate, direct self-referentiality in the world, which does not have to go through a process of cognition. Immediate identification is graspable through the sensuality of existence, which manifests itself in conflicts of the digital universe.

It is not surprising that “First-Person-Games” play a paradigmatic role when it comes to analyzing digital games philosophically. They are not only offering a correct simulation of a space in a total state of emergency, but they are also touching upon the philosophical experience of self-consciousness in their symbolical connotation. (Mersch 2008: 28) One tends to think that the camera would allow for a subjective identification in the sense of immediacy, but one should not forget that even in “Ego-Shooter” the avatar is present in the form of weapons or hands – they also change the character of the avatar. It is “I” who acts and decides, but in the mode of constant self-reflection in the game, meaning in the immediate identification with the “Not-I”.

“No Russian”, the third level of the military ego-shooter CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2 by Infinity Ward from 2009, contains one of the most controversial and discussed scenes in video game history.<sup>2</sup> It perfectly demonstrates how the dialectic of subjectivity unfolds itself in Digital Games. Here the paradox of identification is not only present in the game-play, but also in the subject of the sequence. This unique doubling allows for insights into how self-consciousness operates in this medium. In this very provoking, but thoughtfully composed stage the player creates a massacre by taking on the role of an USA undercover agent that undermines Russian terrorists. The massacre becomes ground zero for a global military conflict between the USA and Russia that sets the tone for the entire game. The player participates in this massacre and has three options: (1) He can act “as-if”, in order to keep his cover, and participate in shooting helpless civilians. (2) He can choose not to shoot at all and simply follow the other terrorist through the level. (3) He can shoot at the terrorists themselves. If one shoots at the terrorists the player loses his cover, meaning he does not play his role correctly, and the game is over. In the censored versions of the Game, like the German one, shooting at civilians is also prohibited by the game, but in the uncut version it is the most reasonable way to act due to the games narration and structure. Although it is the “I” that participates in these cruel activities, one has the necessary distance from what is happening. Without this distance the game would not work. Digital Games allow humans to experience such existential action by holding the potential to double the movement of self-consciousness through their second-order framework. What allows this elevation in a system theoretical sense, are the Paradox Ontologies games create.

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<sup>2</sup> The scene can be watched online under the following URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXBDkev5lM>

## Paradox Ontologies

By taking the paradox in the German word “Spiel”<sup>3</sup> into account, it is hard to imagine that this concept could actually provide a notion of freedom and productiveness in terms of subjectivity beyond its aesthetic dimension. So the question is: How can true improvisation within a system of fixed rules occur? The answer lies within the performative act oscillating between game and play. Therefore game-play is always grounded in an existential notion of the present. Games cannot hold any message without being performed, which means not only interpreted, but really enacted. Pure improvised movement (play) can never define signs for a society if it is not bound into a set of rules (game). On the other hand, artificial regulations of processes can never gain reality without being brought to life by agents devoted to their absurdity. Both game and play, although on a different ontological basis, are determining each other.

Gregory Bateson showed in his play-theory how the meta-communicative message “This is a Game” constantly produces paradoxes as soon as spoken out, namely:

“These actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand would denote.” (Bateson 1972, 2000: 180)

The challenge in the process is to gather the ability for conscious differentiation. What refers to the “Not-Game” is thus constantly present and communicates this in the rule-based reality of cybernetics. Hence the paradox of games thrives from the impossibility of identification between subject and object. Due to paradox the process of identification has to take a detour over the circular in order to become verified: If the first term is true, all the others become false, and the other way around. Rules cannot be determined without holding the premises in themselves to be broken. Therefore the simple act of setting up a rule is already a way of breaking the rule and the term of game-play is sent into his own aporia.

Computer games also hold this instability of the “This is a Game“ message in themselves: here one communicates constantly about things that do not exist. Games with a relation to reality of the first order, e.g. the game TAG, are sometimes destroyed by accident because of discrepancies between the real and the imaginative. This can have huge consequences on reality itself. Therefore Bateson also speaks about the “map-territory differentiation”:

“The discrimination between map and territory is always liable to break down, and the ritual blows of peace-making are always liable to be mistaken for the “real“ blows of combat.” (ibid: 182)

In the case of computer games however this instability is only of aesthetic interest, since the virtual is capable of a second-order logic, which allows for alienation of the subject from its imagination. Ontologically speaking the high algorithmic resolution of computers is a core characteristic of digital games. I use the term “resolution“ not in a technical-visual sense, but in a speculative: It aims to describe the ontological fineness of the inter-reflexive dualisms between subject and object in the process. In the playful diffusion with objects the presence

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<sup>3</sup> In German the term “Spiel“ means "game" and “play” at the same time. The usage of the word in a sentence defines whether it is describing artificial competition framed within a set of rules (game) or the movement of improvisation within the "Let's-Act-As-If-"subtext (play).

of the artificial rule-based world becomes absolute. Here the indistinguishability between reality and fiction becomes lucid, meaning not any longer differentiable since elevated onto a new term. In terms of subjectivity, the computer game thus becomes not a further differentiated form of a classical game-play understanding, but a logical higher developed mechanism, that allows for the coexistence of Paradox Ontologies and for implementing multiple, sometimes even contradicting, rules.

The devotion toward the absurdity in digital game-play overcomes the common reality and allows access to an understanding of reality without the value of truth or even subjectivity. It emphasizes an understanding of simulation without reference to reality, which still can potentially mean an own world. The reason for this lies in the term “realism”. Realism in computer games is not achieved by simulation, or mimicry – although technically speaking every game is some sort of simulation of a system – but by convincing the user of the authenticity of the system he is dealing with. It is a Post-Nietzschean understanding of “reality” we are dealing with here.

### **The paradox in player identification**

Roger Caillois uses the mask as a metaphor for consciousness in his play theory *Man, Play and Games* from 1961 in order to describe the knowledge a player must acquire to withstand the very paradox in becoming somebody else. Here game-play tries to overcome the profane sphere. For this reason this type of play is so prominently placed within Caillois' play-theory: the mask opens a space for the myth to become reenacted, in order to go from play to ritual. (Moebius 2006: 368) In order to do so, the mask carrier has to be both at the same time: the actor controlling the mask and the manifestation of the mask itself. Caillois describes it the following way:

“The mask was the best symbol of superiority. In masked societies, the key question is whether one is masked and inspires fear or is not masked and is therefore afraid. In a more complex organization, some are afraid and others frighten, according to the degree of initiation. To pass to a higher grade is to be instructed in the mystery of a more secret mask.” (Caillois 1961, 1979: 105)

According to Caillois the mask, as a metaphor of consciousness, is a symbol of power in archaic cultures. In societies, which claim the mask a higher value, fear is arising from it. Therefore the carrier of the mask is in control of this fear. The others, which are not wearing the mask, fear it. In order to rise in this hierarchy one has to be introduced into the secret of the mask. Her secret is the fact that the one who wears it is disguised: “One learns that the terrifying supernatural apparition is merely a man in disguise, and ones dons a mask in order to terrify nonmembers or lower-grade initiates.” (ibid.) Like Caillois further explains knowledge and usage are here closely intertwined:

“The system of initiation and masks only functions when there is a precise and constant correlation between the revelation of the secret behind the mask and the right to use it in turn to reach a deifying trance and frighten novices. Knowledge and its application are closely connected. Only one

who knows the true nature of the mask and its wearer may assume that formidable appearance.“ (ibid.)

The closeness between knowledge and its application is not strong because the mask carrier is conscious of the meaning of the mask, but because it defines the very paradox of the game played. When a ghost is acknowledged in the mask carrier, so the play of the mask carrier succeeds, because the illusion is perfect. The mask carrier on the other hand has to withstand the balance between the knowledge of the mask, meaning its artificiality, and its function within the game, meaning its potential to overcome the profane sphere. Otherwise he would fall into madness, which means to understand the illusion as reality and thus to lose himself in his role. In this case he would end the process of game-play, by determining it as useless. This corrupted form of mimicry shows itself in alienation and in its “doubling of personality”; today we might speak of “schizophrenia” or simply of a mental sickness.

In digital games there is a slight, but crucial twist concerning this identity struggle: the doubling of consciousness itself is represented in the “procedural rhetoric” (Bogost 2007: 28-29) of computer games. In other words, the event of self-awareness is extracted from the player and transferred into the unfolding of the code itself. The playful access to the doubling of consciousness refers to the autonomy of thinking. One should not underestimate the mental achievement in playing out the very irrationalism of such a cruelty, like in the case of the Massacre in CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2. However the proposed automatism in computer games gets consequently broken in the described scene in “No Russian”: After the player shoots randomly into the helpless crowd and lives through a fight with the police, at the very end of the level the circle reveals itself: suddenly the player gets shot by the leading terrorist with whom he was collaborating the whole time. The player experiences his own virtual death and the game is showing him that it ‘knew’ all the time that he was indeed a double agent. Thus the player is left alone by the game to question his immediate self-reference (Manfred Frank), which was intentionally placed prior to his relationship with the game world. In a speculative sense the player is not only observing himself while playing the game, he is indeed creating subjective meaning by experiencing the elevation from consciousness to self-consciousness in Hegelian terms. However “No Russian” uses the subjective meaning only to fortify the emotional involvement of the player in relation to the game’s narration.

The sovereign act within the identification process, which drives the whole process, is the experience of the impossible, a mediation about the extremes of the possible. In fact we are confronted here with the inner experience of the subject, whose conflict is displaced into game-play. The inner substance of this subject, meaning his unity, is lost. In other words: The inner and sovereign experience of the subject is the very experience of the impossible unity and the crack of the self. (Moebius 2006: 347)

This brings us to the concept of “strong communication“ by the French philosopher and mystic George Bataille, which finds its contemporary expression in the digital medium and which he described in his masterpiece *The Inner Experience* from 1943. For Bataille strong communication constitutes being and not the other way around. The subject becomes the nescience and the object the unknown. (Bataille 1943, 1988: 9) “Ipse” is Batailles expression for the strong self, which differences itself from the “I”. According to Bataille the Ipse is not an isolated subject within the world, but a space of communication, the mergence of subject and object. (ibid.: 10) The experience of this mergence “[...] cannot be communicated if”, like

Bataille expresses himself, “the bonds of silence, of effacement, of distance, do not change those they put into play.” (ibid.: 29) And further he writes that it does “[...] not suffice to recognize – this only puts the mind into play; it is also necessary that the recognition take place in the heart (intimate, half- blind movements). This is no longer philosophy, but sacrifice (communication).” (ibid.: 51)

Sacrifice as technology is the conscious abstinence of knowledge. One throws himself into the void and “[...] nothing, neither in the fall nor in the void, is revealed, for the revelation of the void is but a means of falling further into absence”. (ibid.: 52) The process of identity reveals itself here as “dialectic of absurdity”. The true goal of this elevation is to gain knowledge through absurdity. Here, both, subject and object become “perspectives of being”. (ibid.: 54) Their communication derives the substance of both of them and thus their relation to truth. Bataille himself describes this the following way:

"I affirm at the same time: that existence is communication – that all representation of life, of being, and generally of "anything", is to be reconsidered from this point of view." (ibid.: 98)

Full communication becomes accessible when one frees himself from the idea of the useful. (ibid.: 116) The game begins and ends at this threshold. In between we find an understanding of existence, which reveals deepness without reason. It is life, which shows itself in the very process as painless act of violence.

### **Violence as negation in the process of subjectivity**

Digital games emphasize negation in the dialectic movement of subjectivity through the metaphorical act of mere violence. Violence is the most significant theme of the medium. In the case of “No Russian” the act of killing becomes alienated from reflection only to reoccur in the synthesis of creating reason out of the unreasonable. This is very drastically represented in the helplessness of all the victims of the massacre. During the first half of the stage there is nothing that holds the player back from killing, no friction set by the game to make an argument. The game seduces the player by offering a surrealistic fantasy. The paradoxical potential of the doubling of consciousness in the process of identification allows the experience of the “simplest surrealistic act” described by André Breton. It means to shoot blindly and randomly at a perfect day – the sun is shining, you are very loved and are successful etc. Breton calls meaningless murder the ultimate existential act in his Second Manifesto of Surrealism from 1930:

“The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd. Anyone who, at least once in his life, has not dreamed of thus putting an end to the petty system of debasement and cretinization in effect has a well-defined place in that crowd, with his belly at barrel level.”  
(Breton 1929, 1972: 125)

In this abyss of the unreasonable act of pure negation, the very act of violence forces the player to identification. In this sense one can argue that, while games in general make believe

in the absurd action, digital games tend to make believe in absurd identifications. Therefore violence in digital games has to be understood as an outcry for existence. What calls for existence is not the subject, but the dialectical movement of self-consciousness we nowadays call 'playing'.

How this is working exactly one can see in the example of fear: There aesthetic, the voluntary immersion into danger, is in computer games the dominant existential expression. Here one can experience fear without breaking the illusion. For Gregory Bateson such situations could lead to the potential collapse of the meta-communicational state of the “magic circle”, from Johan Huizinga, which communicates the game between the players: In the moment of extreme fear the reality of the simulation is not to be questioned. However in digital games fear does not destroy the unfolding of events. Here the message of the “Let's-Act-As-If”-subtext is repeated much more often and thus holds the player in the safe distance from the illusionary world. One cannot distinguish the artificial from the natural within the artificial world. Therefore one is not even trying. With Henry Jenkins one could come to the following conclusion: “We speak not just of controlling the characters but of ‘owning’ the space of the game“ (Jenkins 2005).

One can find a suitable picture in the history of philosophy in the chapter “Master and Slave” of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, which in the 1930s Alexandre Kojève declared anthropologically to be the key sequence in achieving self-consciousness. For Kojève and Hegel the dialectic of master and slave is not about the elimination of the Other, but about ruling over him – which is very important for the development of self-consciousness. This can only appear, since the reality between master and slave is set as an absolute for the moment of the process and that means the present. Therefore we cannot find in the formal, logical reality of computer games any kind of true death, only its constant presence reminding the player that he is still taking part in the process: as soon as death occurs, the reality constructing process is simply ended. It is the same in Hegel, because the master can only be the one, who does not fear death or even better, who does not even have a concept of it. The slave on the other hand fears for his own existence and would prefer to accept the sovereignty of his master in favor of losing his life. The same holds true for the dialectic between the one knowing the secret of the mask and the Other fearing it in Caillois. We find this exact logical function of death as the true Lord, the lord of time, in digital games. He is present in the processing of the algorithmic world and allows an opening to an existential turn for the subject through his actions. The computer game is the first media form that incorporates such an absolute understanding of time in order to constitute reality, since subject and object bound in a single medium get projected into the Post-Nietzschean “reality”.

Why is this sharpening of time in digital games so unique? In order to gather an answer to this question, one has to remind himself that time in this media has to be understood as a reality established in the confrontation of man and machine. Therefore time appears at first as an enemy or an apriorial condition in digital game-play: the subject is fighting against time. By giving it the authority of the present, it becomes omnipresent within and outside the aesthetic experience. This extended act of reflection finds in this speculative form its certainty in regards to its second-order relationship to the real: The relationship of the classical *reflexio* gets turned around and becomes a transcendental understanding of time in the permanent timelessness, which occurs necessarily in the state of the permanent lack of time. Here time

does not appear as something we have been anguished about or bored by, but as chance. In an existential sense, time becomes a unique opportunity, which is not asking for more than a sensibility for the right moment: the moment, in which destiny is revealing itself.

The circle of Paradox Ontologies merges at this synchronized layer of reflection with a strong sense of the present. An event is occurring, like in the time shortly after the French revolution, as the early romantics hold the existential freeing of emotion for the subject against the screaming of reason. (Schiller 1795, 1965 and Novalis 1795/96) It is the devotion to the paradox of virtual identification, which reminds the consciousness to see the “καιρός” (Kairos).<sup>4</sup> Kairos has to be understood as free in order to be present for the subject. In its core it is “notwendig frei”<sup>5</sup> (Novalis 1795/96: 62), because the formal reasons determine the appearance of the subject, but their actualization allows the overcoming of determinacy in the very experience of game-play.

### **Performative Reflection**

In his essay *The Dionysian Worldview* from 1870 Friedrich Nietzsche makes clear that the servant of Dionysus always has to “observe” himself while losing control:

“Just as intoxication is the play of nature with man, so the creation of the Dionysian artist is play with intoxication. This state can only be understood symbolically, unless one has experienced it himself: it is similar to a situation in which one dreams and at the same time experiences the dream as dream. The votary of Dionysus must be intoxicated and at the same time must catch himself in the act as his own spectator. Dionysian artistry does not show itself in the alternation of presence of mind and intoxication, but in their proximity, their coexistence.” (Nietzsche 1870, 1997: 82)

In the case of digital games, such behavior can be identified through the tension between action and reflection within the procedural unfolding of self-consciousness. In this very moment of game-play experience action and reflection tend to become closely interrelated. In the case of “No Russian” this becomes evident at the end of this orgy of meaningless negation, when the game reminds the player that he is absolutely powerless. The curtain is lifted; the radical act of improvisation turns out to be nothing more than a mere illusion. At this point both action and reflection collide into a single lucid point, at which the process of self-reflection is replaceable with the very act of playing. Digital game-play reminds us about the possibility to break this fundamental *différance*. And gamers learn that within this very indifferent tension subjective meaning arises beyond inescapable systems.

The very paradox of the present and the absent appears in digital games as the masking of the rule-break or the occurrence of a narration in development. It is the coming together of two qualities in terms of experience: “immersion”, meaning the self-forgetfulness of the player in the game-world, and the “awakening”, meaning the backdropping into the reality of the game as fictional form. The German media and culture theorist Natasha Adamowsky calls this “awakening” also “reflexive awareness”. (Adamowsky 2000: 50) She uses this term for her

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<sup>4</sup> According to Greek mythology „Kairos“ is the god of chance, of the right or opportune moment.

<sup>5</sup> In English: “necessarily free” (own translation).

analysis of computer games by referring to Barbara Meyhoffer's usage of the term "reflexive awareness", Erwin Goffman's concept of "self-conscious action", as well as Victor Turner's definition of "reflexive-being". According to Adamowsky the interplay between "reflexive awareness" and self-forgetfulness is responsible for the quality of a digital game in general. I suggest to capture this state in the term of 'Performative Reflection'. Here the player and the game merge together in the very moment of ecstasy. On the one hand the player is searching for an Other to become active, and on the other he is losing himself in the flow of game-play. In video games ecstasy stands between the dissolution and the constitution of the subject. At the one hand the code is always present for the player, but on the other he discovers always something new and generates events.

Ecstasy plays a very significant psychological role in game-play, as Caillois already noticed. As the fourth category in Caillois' play-theory the play-form of ecstasy has to be understood as a meta-category which can appear anytime anywhere: *ilinx*. As a meta-category it offers immersive aesthetic experiences that allow the player to accept his destiny: At the one hand there is the feeling of losing control, at the other hand there is an extension of the senses and the acceleration of thought. Caillois writes that the attraction to ecstasy exists insofar as it "[...] consist(s) of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. In all cases, it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness." (Caillois 1961, 1979: 23) Therefore one has to understand ecstasy as the moment of gaining awareness and the ability to stabilize the fundamental paradox in game-play. It is the moment in which the mask carrier, meaning the player, acknowledges that he is both at once: the one playing and the one being played. According to Caillois *ilinx* became an own play category in the age of the industrial revolution, when fun fairs and amusement parks appeared.

Caillois shows himself as a good student of Friedrich Nietzsche: He understands ecstasy not as an escape from reality, but as a fundamental drive of every human. Nietzsche described the conflict between the illusion structuring the aesthetic experience, which he calls the Apollonian, and the very existential movement of ecstasy driving the aesthetic experience, which he calls the Dionysian, as the fundamental fusion of very artistic activity. Schiller showed already that their union is being held by playfulness. Therefore the goal of ecstasy is not chaos or mere anesthesia, but a potential merging of direct reflection and immediate action.

As well as chance, which defines Caillois' second play-category the *alea*, the ecstasy is "[...] an integral part of nature, and one controls it only in obeying it". (ibid.: 138) Devotion to the meaningless and absurd is the very engine of every game-play. It leads to the ecstasy of playing, often referred to as the experience of flow in Game Studies. Caillois is highly aware of the fact, that the corrupted form of *ilinx* is the addiction or the misuse of ecstasy: the moment in which reflection does not any longer take place. Caillois writes about its corrupted form the following:

"The individual pursuit of anxiety and panic conquers man's discernment and will. He becomes a prisoner of equivocal and exalting ecstasies in which he believes that he is divine and immortal, ecstasies which in the end destroy him." (ibid.: 78)

The danger of corruption, meaning the addiction and the negation of reflection in ecstasy, is an essential part of this play-form, but not its goal. The risk of losing oneself in this type of game-play is one of the highest stakes being put into play. Caillois shows that this stake is potentially at hand in every game-play experience.

Without reflection, without sticking to the rules, every orgy, every act of radical squandering of meaningless negation – a last event without the opportunity of repetition – is worthless. Performative Reflection is located between pure thought and true action and brings both together in the aesthetic experience of existential game-play: the ecstasy.

The reflected ecstasy is a form of intense life and not its abandonment. It is life, its revolution against itself and its freedom to sense as strong as possible. It is the question of the merging of action and reflection, which extends the set of rules, because, as the French Existentialist Albert Camus writes in his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* from 1942, “[w]here lucidity dominates, the scale of values becomes useless.” (Camus 1942, 1991: 63) The only truth, which one can derive from it, is unspeakable, “[...] it comes to life and unfolds in men.” (ibid.: 68) The rule is not extended by searching for it in the process of game-play, but in pursuing the pure life. The usage of the metaphor of life is legitimized in digital game by its strong link to performativity. In the medium of the computer games every player becomes a meta-actor through the determination of his own involvement. He is a voyager in the virtual and, how Camus expresses, “[h]e is a traveler in time and, for the best, the hunted traveler, pursued by souls.” (ibid.: 79) He is an unknown, dies the death of hundreds of creatures, which he brought to life. (ibid.: 78) His goal is to “[...] being nothing or to being several”. (ibid.: 79) The player is penetrating the silence and the standstill of the code and awakes the world to life in the very event of Performative Reflection. He gives her a narration and meaning, because, how Camus expresses it so precisely, “[...] at least the passions can rush onto their stage. They speak in every gesture; they live only through shouts and cries.” (ibid.: 80) The destiny of the player reveals itself in the scream: He builds up a world and gives it away once again. He learns to move within it, how to rule it and still wins nothing. The more often he acts in it, the better he can divide himself from her and learns to keep a critical distance. Even in the highest state of ecstasy he still sees the difference between experienced time and the true time, which he has in his own existence, because the game frequently reminds him that he is just wasting time. He sees in digital games things very clearly. “He feels”, like Camus writes, “the harrowing and irreplaceable quality of that adventure. He knows and can now die.” (ibid.: 85)

The ecstasy, which evolves out of this movement, gets projected by the object into the inner-life of the subject and he becomes aware, as Bataille writes, “[...] that which the world harbors as being heartrending, (is) the continuous slipping of everything into Nothingness. If you wish, time.” (Bataille 1943, 1988: 118) And one feels very comfortable nowadays in this time: One has the freedom to fail, to waste time and to acknowledge the spectacular failing as a “good” in the sense of the “good game”. To speak with the German media-philosopher Claus Pias, the “circular causality” of cybernetics determines that good games never come to an end, as it can never be clear if the human controls the machine or if the machine controls the human. (Pias 2007: 264) In this very gap one has to search for the onto-metaphysical grounding of subjectivity. It offers a sensibility for breaking the circular causality of the artificial world by thematizing exactly this conflict between the natural and the artificial in its

inherent subjective rhetoric of absurdity. The consequence out of this very absurdity is honesty towards the existence:

“If I hold to be true that absurdity that determines my relationship with life, if I become thoroughly imbued with that sentiment that seizes me in face of the world's scenes, with that lucidity imposed on me by the pursuit of a science, I must sacrifice everything to these certainties and I must see them squarely to be able to maintain them. Above all, I must adapt my behavior to them and pursue them in all their consequences.” (Camus 1942, 1991: 21-22)

The power of revelation in ecstasy is thus a “mystical cognition”, which is not free from his object, but quite on the contrary is capable of charging it with meaning. Ecstasy thus is an essential part in creating meaning in the medium of digital games. Death stands in the forefront as the object of ecstasy in the world of video games, because how Bataille phrases it so precisely:

“The desired spectacle, the object, in the expectation of which passion goes beyond itself, is the reason why "I could die for not dying".“ (Bataille 1943, 1988: 124)

“*That* was no message. *This* is a message.” These last words the player receives after getting shot at the very end of “No Russian” suggest that the subject’s death is a reasonable sacrifice in order to keep the process of game-play running. In this very death, which the player experience out of its own simulated subjective perspective, the player gets suddenly reminded about the meaningless and absurdity of the activities he got himself involved in. The player accomplished his goal and failed at the same time. But his very sacrifices is opening up a narration to continue and thus keeping the process of game-play alive.

This way the paradox of identification reveals itself in digital games as being hunted by self-destruction in an existential sense. Therefore the experience of the very confusion, the ecstasy within the paradox of identification, can be transferred upon reality and the narration becomes convincing. Identity means here to hold onto being. A firm identification finds itself only in a sacred revelation, which points upon something that is outside of the illusion, outside of the screen, and thus grounds the illusive experience of subjectivity into an existential notion of the present. Here the paradox of the doubling of consciousness falls apart and one is left with the choices: becoming the mask or being the mask carrier. But instead on getting stuck on this point and to end the game, the player continues his quest for the Other. He returns into the paradox of game-play with the knowledge he gathered. His sacrifice remains present. It is only consequently that one finds himself in an undecidable situation in which this very deviation expresses itself. Only this way sovereignty can occur in an existential manner in game-play. One has to decide without having any motives to do so in order to be part in an event.

To summarize: At the very beginning of Performative Reflection stands the self-abandonment in the identification-process, but then the reflection-process kicks in and one begins to seek for the reflecting Other. The player is searching for the true drama in the object, because as Bataille writes, “[...] one reaches the states of ecstasy or of rapture only by

dramatizing existence in general.” (ibid.: 10) Without dramatization the human is not able to go beyond himself. This kind of turnover into fear touches the human emotionally. An intimate consciousness is provoked through which the merging of subject and object can evolve and an event occurs. (Bataille, 1973, 1989: 50) According to Bataille the intimate is the sacred, the „nimbus of anguish“, (ibid.: 53) and thus the very heart of drama. The subject loses himself in it, forgets about the self and „[...] communicate(s) with a elusive beyond.“ (Bataille 1943, 1988: 11) Thus the projected self-consciousness is directing towards intimacy in digital games:

„Paradoxically, intimacy is violence, and it is destruction, because it is not compatible with the positing of the separate individual.“ (Bataille, 1973, 1989: 51)

War becomes the illusion of the unleashed violence to the outside. “No Russian” thus becomes a sacred moment in the course of CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2, where anguish reveals itself as the seed for narration.

## Conclusion

The medium of digital games expresses itself through the experience of Performative Reflection. To open up in ecstasy means to let the machine code flow freely through oneself and to dance with the code in the state of lucid trance. If one begins to philosophize through the experience of digital games, one finds himself in the same situation like the old Greeks, which were also used to discuss philosophical and mathematical problems while walking. The reason for this is that it is much easier to solve problems when one is also being moved by it. Philosophy becomes a creative process of action and thus it is brought closer to everyday life. Computer games are a perfect reminder on this type of problem solving.

It was René Descartes, who fixated the representation-model of the self-consciousness ontologically for the deduction of all absolute certain expressions of truth. Thus he acquired an ontological grounding for speculative thinking in natural sciences and the analytical attitude. Through Performative Reflection we face a similar suspicion, which occurred nearly 400 years ago to Descartes about the limits of questioning. The question of the unquestionable, of the absolute certain, purely present is readdressed in the urge of questioning the “*is*“ in the process of game-playing. The graspable presence of thought in the mirror of excessive negation is reminding the subject once again of this existential verifiable knowledge.

But is it possible to deduce a similar self-reflective circular argument like “I think, therefore I am” for the experience of digital games? For traditional types of games, like for example the game of TAG, this is easy to prove. The childish game dictates the ontological value already in its very language: “*It*” is always the one, who “*is*”. In the presence of the “*it is*” we find the very manifestation of the fundamental knowledge Descartes gathered, because the paradox becomes absolute for the time game-play is at hand. However reflection in traditional games is not emphasized, since it is lacking the necessary distance from reality. In digital games however, as I have shown, the paradox of identification is doubled. In contrary to traditional games the player is thus in a state of a permanent oscillating dichotomy between

the inner and outer dimension of existential experience. Already through the bodily movements – and may they be even so minimal – he is constantly reminded of the physical necessity, the murmur of being. The premise of the subjective and objective polarity is therefore ontologically placed. This dynamic relation of both polarities gives the dead material life and allows for Performative Reflection to occur.

Descartes speaks about a constantly differentiating consciousness, which is unable to put the very process of reflection into question. For him this very process of reflection means the whole presence of his existence. This presents is ahead of the reflection, which at this point is capable to elevate the certainty of this presents into the epistemical status of knowledge and cognition. At the very core of Performative Reflection we find a similar limit of the reflection process, which is revealing the ontological facticity of our subjective existent. It reveals itself in the question: who plays and who is being played? Is it me who is playing, meaning who “*is it*” in the language of TAG, or is it the Other, meaning the machine, which plays with me and which “*is*” actually “*it*”? Thus we are dealing with the question of the objective displacement of experienced subjectivity, which we encounter in computer games in a performative way.

In the darkness of Performative Reflection this question becomes lucid and leaves the human with nothing more than the knowledge of his own presence. The incarnation of the very act of reflection becomes the principle of deduction of all possible events in the algorithmic medium. Both, thinking and acting, are bound by play. A sensibility for it is graspable through the experience of game-play. It offers a contemporary access to the certainty of the event. Therefore I strongly suggest reemphasizing René Descartes' famous reality engine:

*I play, therefore I am.*

## Games

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE 2. Infinity Ward, PC/XBox360/PS3, 2009

TAG. unknown origin

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