

In the Domain of Optional Rules: Foucault's Aesthetic Self-Fashioning and Expansive Gameplay

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The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end.

-Michel Foucault¹

In this paper, I will explore the resemblance between Michel Foucault's philosophy of aesthetic self-fashioning and “expansive gameplay” – the emergent phenomenon of players imposing additional, optional rules onto the existing, fixed rules of digital games in order to expand, refine or enhance their experience.² Probably the most well-known form of expansive gameplay is speed-running, in which communities of players competitively attempt to complete individual levels or entire games as quickly as possible. This imposes a quantifiable goal—rapid completion—on top of the existing, fixed rules of a game. Another is the much-blogged-about “permadeath” style of playing *Far Cry 2*, which has players refusing the digital game staples of extra lives and “respawns” by quitting and deleting their save games the first time their avatar dies, creating a sense of *gravitas* not usually present in ordinary gameplay and transforming the player's experience.³ RPG players who impose ethical codes of conduct on their avatars similarly transform their experience through the imposition of additional rules. “Zombie” in *Halo 2* is a complete set of player-imposed, commonly-accepted rules for “blob-tag” style multiplayer matches (which became so popular that it was later included as an “official” game-mode in *Halo 3*). Likewise, “Cat and Mouse” in *Project Gotham Racing 2* involves players driving fast cars pushing players in slow cars towards the finish line rather than competing directly, and was also officially incorporated in later versions of the game. These multiplayer examples are sometimes called “honour games” or “consensus games” because the rules are socially enforced, not fixed. By engaging in expansive gameplay and adding rules to a game, the player acts fully within the digitally fixed rules of the game, but not necessarily in alignment with the intended or implied ways of playing it.

In his later work, Foucault shifts his attention away from historically contingent, deterministic structures of Knowledge and Power – pervasive, dominating institutions and systems of thought including the human sciences, psychiatric clinics and asylums, prisons, schools and governments – and begins to examine more closely the processes of subjectification that occur within these structures. Foucault's intention is to “show people that they are much freer than they feel,” to articulate possibility spaces for freedom and to search for alternative ways of constructing identities.⁴ The very structures that dominate and constitute the individual as a subject also create a field wherein it is possible to re-create oneself.⁵ The hope is that through a constant, life-long practice of ethical and aesthetic self-fashioning, one's life can become a work of art.⁶ To engage in aesthetic self-fashioning is to exert power on *oneself* – that is to say, impose rules and disciplines on the way one lives – in the same way that an artist exerts power on his or her materials in order to make a work of art. Gilles Deleuze sums it up nicely: “We're no longer in the domain of codified rules of knowledge (relations between forms) and constraining rules of power (the relation of force to other forces), but in one of rules that are in some

¹ Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988), p. 9.

² Felan Parker, "The Significance of Jeep Tag: On Player-Imposed Rules in Video Games," *Loading... Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* 2, no. 9 (2009).

³ Abraham, Ben. “Permanent Death, Episode 1: An Inauspicious Beginning.” Subterranean Loner Rendered Comatose, June 24, 2009. <http://drgamelove.blogspot.com/2009/06/permanent-death-episode-1-inauspicious.html>.

⁴ Pirkko Markula-Denison and Richard Pringle, *Foucault, Sport and Exercise: Power, Knowledge and Transforming the Self*, 138.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, 11.

sense *optional* (self-relation): the best thing is to exert power over yourself.”⁷

Within the historically-specific constraints of lived existence, as within the rules of a game, people can impose additional, optional rules, and in doing so gain some measure of power or control over themselves and their experience. It would be foolish to uncritically read significance into this similarity between Foucault's philosophy and the phenomenon of expansive gameplay, but by the same token it is difficult to ignore. Accordingly, I will examine three possible ways of accounting for and exploring the affinities (and differences) between Foucault's philosophical model of the self and the gameplay situation, in which the player, as a more-or-less thinking and acting subject, engages with the rule-based structure of the game. First, expansive gameplay can be understood as nothing more than a useful explanatory metaphor for Foucault's concept of aesthetic self-fashioning; second, expansive gameplay can be understood as an actual example of aesthetic self-fashioning and a real practice of liberation; third, expansive gameplay can be understood as a kind of simulation or model of aesthetic self-fashioning, allowing players to experiment with ways of constructing themselves in the real world on a smaller scale. These three approaches are not specific to any one philosophical concept, and so in addition to weighing their respective benefits and limitations for thinking through Foucault's ideas, I hope that this also raises questions about the implications of each for the discussion of games and philosophy more generally.

Expansive Gameplay as Metaphor

Philosophers are no strangers to game-related explanatory metaphors—indeed, it would not be out of the question to suggest that the game, the roll of the dice and the strategic move are privileged metaphors in a fairly wide range of philosophical work. Although he does not cite specific games, Foucault himself returns to the general metaphor with some frequency, as indicated by the epigraph to this paper and the concept of games of truth. Games of truth are the systems of rules that govern various institutions (such as the asylum, the school or the prison) and create the accepted truth within those institutions. Everyone is positioned by and within these systems of rules, and they produce or constitute everyone's subjectivity. Describing networks of Power and Knowledge as games – that is to say, as rule-based systems – certainly seems an effective way of explaining how people are constituted as subjects (players) within those networks (games).

In Ian Bogost's terms, digital games “depict real and imagined systems by creating procedural models of those systems, that is, by imposing sets of rules that create particular possibility spaces for play.”⁸ For Foucault, entirely free choice cannot exist, because people are always already within the rules and constraints of Power-Knowledge. However, if the rules of the game (society) determine the possibility space of experience, and the range – however limited – of available options, then people can add more rules (aesthetic self-fashioning) to change and refine that possibility space (making life into a work of art). If people are all players within the fixed rules of the game of existence, then the most effective path to some kind of liberty is to refuse to be content with “playing the hand we are dealt,” and to play it with *style* by engaging in what Foucault calls “practices of liberty” or “practices of freedom.” Choosing to play *Far Cry 2* according to the “perma-death” rules, the player exerts power on him or herself, producing an entirely new kind of experience.

Foucault's aesthetic self-fashioning is in some sense an “expansive” ethics, based on similar principles and operating in an analogous manner to expansive gameplay. By imposing additional rules onto the structure of existence, the possibilities of life can be worked upon in the same way that gameplay can be expanded and refined beyond the fixed rules of the game. Neither concept is

⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972-1990*, 113.

⁸ Ian Bogost, “The Rhetoric of Video Games,” 122.

(necessarily) subject to a transcendent universal ideal, as the goals and parameters of these practices can be endlessly reconfigured in order to produce different results for different individuals. This metaphorical compatibility, however, could easily be challenged. There is always a quandary in relating philosophy to art and other cultural objects. What is to be gained in straightforwardly “using” games to explain philosophical concepts, or in uncritically applying philosophical concepts to games? Neither strikes me as particularly interesting. To engage Foucault’s theory with concepts derived from digital gameplay, or to engage games using Foucault’s concepts, should require that both the theory *and* the games are transformed in the process. Nevertheless, as an explanatory model for aesthetic self-fashioning, expansive gameplay is surprisingly satisfying, and indeed the tenets of aesthetic self-fashioning are surprisingly useful in explaining the practice of expansive gameplay.

Expansive Gameplay as Practice of Freedom

At what point does expansive gameplay cease to merely resemble aesthetic self-fashioning and become an *actual* practice of freedom? Perhaps the metaphor described above is satisfying precisely because expansive gameplay is more than an explanatory tool, and is in fact an example of Foucault’s system of ethics in practice. The rules of digital games can, after all, be seen as very real parts of the systems of Power and Knowledge that constrain experience and constitute people as subjects. As Alexander Galloway argues, digital games “are, at their structural core, in direct synchronization with the political realities of the informatic age” and the control society.⁹ Mark Silverman and Bart Simon have suggested that Dragon Kill Points, a player-imposed social system of capital in MMORPGs (and a form of expansive gameplay) can be understood in Foucauldian terms as producing disciplined player-subjects.¹⁰ Can expansive gameplay therefore be seen as a “real” site of resistance?

First and foremost, it is important to remember that for Foucault not *all* practices of self-fashioning are automatically practices of liberty. There is nothing inherently freeing about physical exercise, for example—it has to be framed in a certain way to be liberatory. By the same token, however, *any* discipline or activity can in theory become ethical work when approached with the right attitude, so what differentiates some practices from others? The discussion of Foucault’s philosophy in sport and exercise studies is useful here. According to Pirkko Markula and Richard Pringle, the “sporting self” that adheres to a personal code or mandate within the larger moral codes of sport (and the rules of the game in question, of course), can in some cases be seen as a form of aesthetic self-fashioning.¹¹ As the gym class cliché suggests, it doesn’t matter whether you win or lose, *it’s how you play the game*. When an athlete is concerned with the process and experience of training and playing (which is about his or her relation to him- or herself and to other players), rather than simply the outcome of the game (which is only mandated by the “official” rules), he or she is stylizing sporting life in a way that can be described as aesthetic self-fashioning. It is clear, then, that playing videogames might also be part of such a process.

A key component of Foucault’s philosophy is the problematization of the self as constituted by systems of Power-Knowledge, which develops as people test and ponder the boundaries of those systems. In other words, the individual must recognize, name and grasp the societal rules that produce their subjectivity and self in order to self-fashion as an ethical being within those rules. Understanding how the game works, and how it constructs and positions the player, is fundamental to a practice of freedom within a game. Foucault often says that power produces its own opposition. By creating a field

⁹ Alexander Galloway, *Gaming: Essays On Algorithmic Culture*, 91.

¹⁰ Mark Silverman and Bart Simon, “Discipline and Dragon Kill Points in the Online Power Game,” *Games and Culture: A Journal of Interactive Media* 4, no. 4 (October 1, 2009): 368.

¹¹ Markula-Denison and Pringle, 144.

(however tiny) in which individuals are not completely helpless (a space of possibilities), otherwise restrictive systems allow people to recognize their boundaries and to act freely within them. Expansive gameplay, therefore, can be seen as genuine aesthetic self-fashioning, but only in contexts where the rules of the game are actively recognized and problematized as part of larger structures of Power and Knowledge.

An ordinary speed-run in *Halo* doesn't necessarily indicate a Foucauldian ethics in practice, because presumably no such questioning occurs (indeed, the socially imposed rules governing speed-running are so formalized it seems decidedly unlikely). However, acting within one's means as a player in ways that highlight or challenge the real-world games of truth of which games like *Halo* are part and parcel just might count. Take, for example, the concept of the "pacifist run." Like a speed run, pacifist runs require the player to complete a game, or a specific level, as fast as possible, but with the added rule that enemies must not be killed (which is no small feat in an action-oriented game). The *Halo* series is unquestionably dogmatic and jingoistic in its glorification of violent, male military heroism and war for survival against foreign, alien beings. Completing the game without killing anyone while deliberately bearing this glorification in mind, therefore, could be seen as a practice of freedom and a tacit subversion of the individual's intended or presumed role in the system. The notion of a mainstream action game in which the player saves humanity from alien invaders without firing a shot is certainly interesting. Likewise, "Perma-Death" play in *Far Cry 2* has the potential to raise questions about the reality of death in the game's depiction of a volatile and impoverished post-colonial third-world country (as well as in first-person shooters more generally).

Is expansive gameplay an effective or productive form of aesthetic self-fashioning? Does it allow individuals to make life a work of art? Probably not, because as I have argued, Foucault's ethics depends entirely on the specifics of a given situation. In reality, most of the time expansive gameplay is not particularly introspective or thoughtful (even though it *could* be in theory) and is in no way part of an ongoing process of critical reflection and self-fashioning. For Foucault, the difference between a reactionary politics that ineffectually rages against "The System" and an actual practice of freedom is that the latter recognizes and comprehends that subjectivity is fully and irrevocably constituted by the very system that is being critiqued. Furthermore, this way of understanding expansive gameplay relies on a conception of games as being entirely part of the larger system of Power-Knowledge. As many theorists have argued, the relationship between games, culture and social reality is complex, with games existing in an in-between space that is not entirely real *nor* entirely imaginary. Although aesthetic self-fashioning in or through digital games is possible in certain hypothetical instances, approaching expansive gameplay as a general cultural phenomenon from this perspective seems ill-advised.

Expansive Gameplay as Simulation

I propose a hybrid option. If expansive gameplay as metaphor glosses over some meaningful aspects of the relationship between systems of rules in reality and systems of rules in games, and expansive gameplay as an actual practice of freedom presumes equivalency between these systems, then the notion of simulation represents in my view an appealing middle ground. From this perspective, games simulate the kinds of systems that are experienced in reality, in Bogost's sense of simulations as systems of simplified rules or principles that reference real-world systems.¹² It is important to note that my somewhat unconventional use of the term simulation does not refer only to the representation of specific real world processes. Of course, many games simulate running, driving, jumping and shooting, but what is important here is that games also simulate the *form* of real-world rule-based systems in

¹² Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations : An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 96-97.

general. Game rules are a special class of rules that reference and emulate (but also overlap with and are subject to) the kinds of rules that are lived in the real world. Reality is not just a game, and games are not entirely “real.” For the expansive gamer, the game becomes like a scale model that simulates, adapts and recontextualize the systems of reality.

According to this conceptual framework, expansive gameplay takes place within this model, and so as a practice, it too is neither wholly real nor wholly imaginary. As such, it can be understood to have a meaningful-but-not-equivalent relationship to aesthetic self-fashioning, in the same way that games have a meaningful-but-not-equivalent relationship to reality. The rules of digital games constitute a culturally- and socially-demarcated (but not completely isolated) space for the pleasurable exploration of rule-based systems. I would argue that in the “safe” possibility space within the fixed rules of a game, which is analogous to the real space within the limitations of Power-Knowledge, players can *practice* (in both senses of the term) ways of refining lived and played experience. Although the specific strategies of expansive gameplay (playing through a game without killing any enemies, for example) don't really translate into the real world, and hardly count as making life a work of art, the *forms* that these strategies take very much do translate. Seeking the boundaries of a possibility space, imposing new rules on existence, re-purposing available tools and other expansive strategies are central to Foucault's notion of aesthetic self-fashioning.

Expansive gameplay emerges from the exploration of a game's rules and the spaces for play that they constitute, just as practices of freedom emerge from the exploration, contemplation and problematization of the self as constituted by the rules of society. As a group of players explores the basic multiplayer race modes in *Project Gotham Racing 2* and experiments with different combinations of cars and win conditions, the rules and affordances of the game become apparent, and are reconfigured into the expansive gameplay of Cat and Mouse. Players' relations to themselves and to other players, and the possibility of transforming these relations, are inevitably considered in the course of expansive gameplay. As Bogost puts it, “This is really what we do when we play video games: we explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the symbolic systems the game provides.”¹³ As players develop ways of refining their in-game experience, if framed in the right way, expansive gameplay can (perhaps) help to problematize real-world rules and systems and to cultivate the inward and outward-looking critical stance necessary for aesthetic self-fashioning.

This is the utopian view. The gloomier interpretation is that expansive gameplay actually *replaces* real-world practices of freedom, by allowing individuals to fashion and produce themselves in a straightforward, entertaining and harmless manner that has minimal impact on their real-world experience. Expansive gameplay allows people to enjoy the illusion of liberty while their real lives remain unchallenged and unchanged.

In either case, thinking of expansive gameplay as a simulation of sorts is a productive way of understanding it as a cultural phenomenon. When considered as analogous to aesthetic self-fashioning (but on a smaller scale and at a partial remove from the real world), an interesting relationship between the two practices becomes apparent. The kinds of strategies that can be employed by an individual constituted by and existing within a system of rules, and the ways in which these practices are cultivated and produced through the active contemplation of spaces of possibility, demonstrate a link between the playful, “safe” exploratory practice of expansive gameplay and the more substantive transformations enabled by a rigorous, real-world practice of Foucauldian self-fashioning. Foucault's conception of the self differs from other philosophical models in that it can be applied within *any* game or rule-based construct. Like systems of knowledge and power, games constitute the player as a particular kind of subject; as noted in the call for papers for this conference, they offer “interactive representations of self-models that can be acted out and thereby evaluated.” But beyond this, rather

¹³ Bogost, “The Rhetoric of Video Games,” 121.

than focusing only on the ways in which the rule-based systems of particular games as procedural objects construct the subjectivity of abstract players (“this game constitutes the player as a Cartesian subject”), Foucault’s philosophy enables a consideration of player experiences and actions across *different* games and rule-based systems. Foucault’s emphasis is always on historical human practices, and so by putting specific empirical examples of expansive gameplay in dialogue with theoretical-philosophical concepts, I suggest that this “simulation” approach can establish what John Mullarkey calls a “productive encounter”¹⁴ not only between philosophy and digital games as cultural artifacts, but between philosophy and specific acts of gameplay.

¹⁴ John Mullarkey. *Refractions of Reality: Philosophy and the Moving Image* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 26.

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