

Between *Autopoiesis* and Neoliberal Self-Fashioning: the Dialectics of Self-Construction in Single-Player Role-Playing Games

Introduction

This paper proposes to examine the thesis that single-player RPG games occupy a particularly strategic position in abetting the ‘self-construction’ that occupies a central role in the formation of contemporary subjectivity and which resonates with what may be broadly termed ‘neoliberal subjects’. Self-construction is meaningful for neoliberal subjects because it mirrors not only an individualistic neoliberal ‘rationality’ (Dardot & Laval, 2013) that places the onus for change and responsibility on the self, and which arguably only permits self-construction within certain parameters, but also points to an excess that bodes the promise of freedom from this rationality, of fashioning the self as a work of art. As such, self-construction is doubly meaningful for contemporary subjects, reinforcing a dominant discourse of self-betterment as well as hinting at a genuinely recuperative and emancipatory function. To this end, I use the term ‘self-construction’ in a neutral way, encompassing both neoliberal self-fashioning and its adoption of self-creation and the realisation of one’s individuality as its “primary engine and product line” (Nealon, 2008, p. 13), as well as the ethicoaesthetic project of the refusal of the self, the artistic self-fashioning and transformation championed by Foucault in his later work that Timothy O’Leary denotes as *autopoiesis* (2002, p.133).¹ This paper will argue that there is an ambivalence between the two - a dialectics of self-construction – in some single-player role-playing games (RPGs). This ambivalence is due to a failure of certain categories of thought to adequately grasp the complexity of the existing states of affairs. There consequently exists a political task to delve into this ambivalence in order to comprehend the manner in which subjectivities are being constituted by computer games and how this can be different, although this paper will have the comparatively more modest goal of exploring this ambivalence in relation to a case study.²

The meaningfulness of computer games will be situated within the context of theories of biopolitical power and neoliberalism as articulated by Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2013) and Jeffrey Nealon (2008), which draws upon the work of Foucault, particularly the series of lectures that he delivered at the Collège de France in 1978/1979, entitled *The Birth of Biopolitics*. This framework will, given Foucault’s intellectual commitments, therefore not constitute an approach that foregrounds the conscious intersubjective meanings that computer games have for their various kinds of players.³ The meaningfulness arises from the historical position of a particular kind of subject – the neoliberal subject – for whom *autopoiesis* bodes a genuine promise of detaching themselves from being constructed in a normalising way that limits the potential for their flourishing and for whom neoliberal self-fashioning reinforces the forms of anticipated reward with which they are familiar.

The first part of the paper will, invoking this framework, outline the categories of *autopoiesis* and neoliberal self-fashioning. The second part will address the contemporary context: the conditions within which subjectivities arise in the developed world, introducing the idea of a neoliberal ‘rationality’ to designate its theorisation in terms that include the role of competition, evaluation and risk-assessment. The third part will offer a closer analysis of the so-called neoliberal subject that exists in these conditions. It is in relation to the player and their propensities that any game takes on a particular meaningfulness and is unlocked in a certain way; understanding this conjunction between the player (or a particular kind of player) and the game avoids the pitfall of asserting that the game produces a uniform type of effect in all its potential players – this kind of claim is problematic even if it might be the case that the game

¹ O’Leary’s preferred spelling is in fact “*autopoesis*”, but since he does not give any particular reason for this preference, I will use its more conventional form.

² Such a project would be in accordance with Foucault’s sentiment that in place of apathy, we need to cultivate the view that everything can be “dangerous”, and thus a kind of “pessimistic activism” (Foucault, 1984 [1983], p.343).

³ Foucault insists on a hard demarcating “line that separates a philosophy of experience, of meaning [*sens*] and of subject, and a philosophy of knowledge, of rationality and of the concept”. Foucault aligns himself with what he takes to be Canguilhem’s lineage and project: building a philosophy of the concept (Nealon, 2008, p. 15).

inherently evidences the aforementioned neoliberal rationality, since there is also an ‘excess’ to the possibilities in a game. The fourth part will prepare the way for the fifth part by exploring the boundaries between playing *with* a game and playing a game (Leino 2010), and suggest that there are connections between this and the intensification of techniques of governmentality. The fifth part will consist of the case study, that of levelling-up in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006), which leads to the issue of whether one plays in accordance with the rationality embedded into the game even when one is playing along self-set goals rather than strict gamic demands. The significance of this argument consists in the view that increasing technological sophistication and innovation has manifested in the form of a transition towards games in which players more frequently occupy this boundary – they do not exactly play with the game, but nor are their decisions so often bound by the threat of gamic discontinuation, and that this development is far from neutral. Finally, the sixth part will include some reflections on the relationship between non-processual aspects of RPGs and self-construction.

1. The ambivalence of self-construction

The significance of self-construction, with its connotations of unfettered self-determination, can be contextualised within a trajectory of the insidious decorporealisation of power and of its increasing intensity, lightness, and efficiency (Nealon, 2008, p. 32).⁴ This dualism, it will be argued, is also expressed in the discussions of ‘pharmacological’ dialectics (from the Greek word *pharmakon*, which carries the duality of meaning both ‘poison’ and ‘cure’ or ‘remedy’) in relation to ‘Empire’s’ reliance on ‘immaterial labour’ and the new technologies that have the potential to be genuine tools of autonomy (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 32) as well as more fine-grained perpetuations of control; the ‘multitude’, which refers to the new forms of subjectivity (Hardt & Negri, 2000, pp. 195-197), is technologically astute and is *simultaneously* the engine and the antagonist of Empire.⁵ The double-edged aspect further connects with the shifting boundaries between work and play, where work is made more playful/tolerable but the play principle itself is arguably subverted, and power reaches “beyond articulation and discourse into the extralinguistic sources of creativity in play” (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 15).⁶ Essentially, as more of life is captured under Empire – the arenas of leisure, play, and sociality – the increasing subsumption is argued to herald the increasing potential for resistance. It will be seen that Foucault’s (1984) concept of the subject as a form capable of transformation theorises this irreducible potential, although the way it is pursued has become almost inseparable from the operation of neoliberal subjectification.

I will turn, first of all, to Foucault’s concept of aesthetic self-transformation (or *autopoiesis*). I am not so concerned here, with Guattari’s conception of *autopoiesis*, a term that he borrowed from Francisco Varela (1989), and which undoubtedly aligns his ethicoaesthetic project with that of Foucault’s.⁷ Although both theorists had called for creative practices and strategies that would enable subjects to go beyond their habitual selves, Guattari’s envisioning of trans-subjective states that could remove the ontological curtain between self and other (1996, p. 195), and of decentred ecologies of group subjectivity, was comparatively more optimistic and in some ways more imaginative than Foucault’s, being less mired in a theory of subjectification that seems to rule out the requisite autonomy for such an undertaking. At the Howison Lectures, for example, Foucault had explained that his philosophical trajectory as an attempt to escape, to

⁴ “Numerous studies (Chabot, 2012; Dardot & Laval, 2013; Lazzarato, 2014; Sassen, 2008; Sennett, 2006) have suggested that contemporary capitalism is making more demands on its subjects, reaching into more dimensions of their existence – emotional, affective, and intimate – than in previous decades” (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 6).

⁵ “Virtual gaming is ambivalent: one face points toward the increasing corporate absorption of unpaid “playbor” to extend the life and profitability of games; the other turns towards intensifying autonomous production, with periodic but increasingly frequent flashes of conflict and outbreaks of anticorporate game activism” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2010).

⁶ This dualism also relates to Kirkpatrick’s point about the ambivalence of ludification: “between enhancing social connection and energizing existing processes on one side and exacting a cost in terms of authenticity, or sincere connection on the other” (2015, p. 2).

⁷ “[T]his ecology and ethology of subjectivity implies a kind of self-construction or self-organisation, a certain kind of auto-cohesiveness or, following Francisco Varela, an autopoiesis (Guattari, 1996, p. 195)”.

“get out from the philosophy of the subject”.⁸ By this he meant any philosophy which gives the individual subject a fundamental role in the constitution of meaning, which sees “the foundation of all knowledge and the principle of signification as stemming from the meaningful subject” (Foucault & Sennett, 1981, pp. 8-9). This tension, between the freedom presupposed for the ethicoaesthetic project, and the freedom that has been argued not to subsist within subjects, has come to be one of the most interesting polarising aspects of his work for Foucaultian scholars.⁹

Foucault’s aim was to foreground the “lines of fragility” (1990 [1983], p. 36) that run through our forms of subjectivity as a means of getting rid of the subject itself and in order to “open up the space of freedom...of possible transformation” (ibid.). To this end, Foucault envisaged an aesthetic attitude towards the self – an *autopoiesis* – that could realise this project of freedom. It was an attitude of continuous self-transformation based on the thinking that the subject is *not* an unalterable substance but rather a ‘form’ that is capable of transformation (Foucault, 1987 [1984], p. 121). One of the ways in which the transformation could be achieved was through the exercise of certain arts or practices upon the self, although they were by no means systematised by Foucault; James Bernauer has characterised the genealogical method as apt to realising the self-transformation called for by Foucaultian ethics (1990, p. 19), whilst Paul Rabinow sought to extend it to critical activity in general (1997, pp. xxxiii-xxxvi). Foucault himself appeared to increasingly see philosophical practice as a technique that could contribute to self-transformation in his later work (O’Leary, 2002, p. 140). But the clearest expression of this was as a form of ‘wandering’; “what would be the value of the passion for knowledge”, Foucault asked, “if it resulted only in a certain knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower’s straying afield of himself?” (1988 [1984], p. 8). This “straying afield” is, in French, *égarement*, which means, quite literally, a ‘wandering’. The whole point of writing or reading his books was to try to “*se déprendre se soi-même*”, to detach oneself from oneself, or even to “disassemble the self” (Foucault, 1988 [1984], p. 8[14]). For Foucault, the task of detaching oneself is carried out through a philosophical and historical investigation of our limits; it is grounded, in other words, on a kind of attitude or knowledge.

The separation between the neoliberal injunction to self-construction and self-enterprise on the one hand, and *autopoiesis* on the other, is one that, for Dardot and Laval, *can* be made. The ascesis of the personal enterprise is completed by the subject’s identification with the enterprise, which they argue is quite different from the exercises of ‘self-culture’ referred to by Foucault, whose object was for the subject to establish an ethical distance from oneself – a distance from any social role.¹⁰ They draw upon what Éric Pezet (2007) has called an ‘ascesis of performance’, which represents a rapidly expanding market, including “coaching, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), transactional analysis (TA) – and numerous procedures associated with a ‘school’ or ‘guru’ aim at a better ‘self-mastery’ – of one’s emotions, stress, and relations with customers or collaborators, superiors or subordinates” (cited in Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 269); the ‘falsity’ of these techniques, in terms of genuine *autopoiesis*, turns on the fact that they are concerned only with enhancing the effectiveness of relations that one has with others without any further questioning. This neoliberal self-construction is not a ‘transsubjectivation’, which would involve aiming at a beyond the self that establishes a break with the self and self-renunciation. Nor is it a ‘self-subjectivation’ whereby one would seek to attain an ethical relationship to the self independently of any other goal, whether political or economic in kind. These are the two terms proposed by Foucault to explain the difference between third- and fourth- century Christian asceticism and the Hellenistic era’s more praiseworthy ‘culture of the self’ (Foucault, 2005, p. 214). It is, in fact, an ‘ultra-subjectivation’, whose goal is not a final, stable condition of ‘self-possession’, but a beyond the self that is always receding,

⁸ The opening line of ‘The Howison Lectures: Truth and subjectivity’, transcript of two lectures delivered at the University of California, Berkeley, 1980.

⁹ It is beyond the scope of the current paper to adequately deal with this issue, but it should be noted that two of the theorists on which I heavily lean – Timothy O’Leary (2002) and Jeffrey Nealon (2008) – have different opinions on this matter. O’Leary favours a revisionist Foucault who returns to the humanist fold as a prodigal son. Nealon’s concept of “intensification”, on the other hand, attempts to bridge the disjuncture between Foucault’s middle and late periods.

¹⁰ It has been noted, however, that Foucault’s interpretation of the culture of self in the Hellenistic epoch is not unproblematic. In particular, rather than merely a distancing and aesthetic self-construction, Pierre Hadot argues it also referred to a universal reason immanent in the cosmos, such that the self-transcendence was also a kind of conforming harmonisation with a cosmological order (cited in Dardot & Laval, 2013, pp. 272-273).

and which is constitutionally aligned in its very regime with the logic of enterprise and, over and above that, with the ‘cosmos’ of the world market and market valorisation as self-valorisation (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 284). The contemporary version of *epimeleia* typically consists in “managing a business portfolio’, developing strategies for learning, marriage, friendship, educating one’s children, and managing the ‘capital of personal enterprise’” (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 267).¹¹

There is, however, arguably more ambivalence in this matter than Dardot and Laval would like to admit. This is not to preclude the possibility of identifying cases in which there are elements of ultra-subjectivation, as opposed to transsubjectivation or self-subjectivation. It would also be a mistake to declare the distinction between neoliberal self-fashioning and *autopoiesis* utterly and inseparably indistinguishable, to refrain from making any judgments whatsoever; theoretical self-reflexivity ought not culminate in an inability or unwillingness to speculate about the effects of technology so that we can understand the ways in which they affect us. But nor should this solidify into outright unsophisticated denunciation or celebration, or the quest for rigidly formulaic diagnostic guidance; it is through a tireless attempt to grasp the ‘totality’ of contextual interrelationships, to cling to a non-dogmatic perceptive mindset that pursues committed analysis even as it recognises the fixity of the presuppositions is in doubt. These considerations open onto, in fact, a broader critique of *The New Way of the World*. Dardot and Laval appear to posit neoliberalism as the inevitable outcome of the “rationalization of existence” (2013, p. 11) that they outline through merging together Foucault and Weber (Robbins, 2014). Bruce Robbins argues, however, that rationalisation, for Weber, in the form of universal, transparent rules, the scientific mastery of nature, etc, was in fact what the population at large wanted (ibid.). In contrast, Dardot and Laval are unclear about what it is that foists neoliberal rationalisation upon us; although it does seem to straightforwardly serve the interests of corporations, the authors had already rejected the motive from capitalism. Since it is the state that acts as the engine that drives it forward, it is nevertheless worthwhile interrogating the connection between ‘state interests’ and the various effects of neoliberal policies. What then, are the deeper logics at work, and what is the relationship between them and any possible ‘excess’ or ‘beyond’ to the pervasive rationality, to *autopoiesis*?

A disclaimer, then, is necessary: the argument concerning a neoliberal rationality needs to be inflected through a Jamesonian concept of ‘totality’ as an unrepresentable horizon (Jameson, 1971; 1981, p. 55) in order to enhance the self-reflexivity of the project and to curb the extremes of a potentially self-affirming theoretical frame that finds particular symptoms only because it sets out to look for those and those alone. This totality is posited as always receding, provisional, subject to further elaboration and to the kind of refutation that would call for the resolution of its contradictions at a higher level of synthesis. Although it is assumed that theories of neoliberal capitalism are helpful towards grasping this, what needs to be born in mind includes the tendency for an unchecked proliferation of the term ‘neoliberalism’, or indeed any concept that might be employed to elucidate the totality, that risks dissipating its definitional value (Venugopal, 2015). This, however, must be balanced against the inability to advance any kind of diagnosis, which arguably results in ethico-political stagnation; a certain kind of expedient generalisation cannot be altogether avoided. It will be beyond the scope of this present paper to pursue this question in any depth although I hope to have addressed some aspects of this in the panel presentation at this conference.¹²

2. Neoliberalism, governmentality, and world-reason

Nevertheless, Dardot and Laval’s book, *The New Way of the World*, has been favourably praised as a “shrewd, rich, and erudite commentary” (Leonardi, 2014) to Foucault’s lectures *The Birth of Biopolitics*, which were in themselves fragmentary and had not been planned for subsequent publication. Further, Leonardi thinks that it brings some much-needed precision to the vague *passpartout* label that the notion of ‘biopolitics’ has become in the last decade; the book “precisely specifies the analytical limits of governmentality and, in so doing, reduces the semantic elasticity of the term” (ibid.). The French title of

¹¹ *Epimeleia heautou* is the formulation for ‘care of the self’ or ‘concern for the self’ in classical Greek culture (Foucault, 2005).

¹² Thinking Homogeneous Heterogeneity: Jamesonian ‘Totality’ and Game Studies

the book, “La nouvelle raison du monde,” refers not, of course, to a new way of the world but to a new reason or rationality, a rationality that is also a new mode of governance.

In 1982, Foucault had declared that he was increasingly interested “in the kind of action that an individual practices on himself through techniques of the self”, to the extent of broadening his initial conception of governmentality, which had been unduly focused on techniques for exercising power over others: “I call “governmentality” the encounter between techniques of domination exercised over others and techniques of the self” (Foucault, 2001, p. 1604). Indeed, O’Leary argues that it is possible to pinpoint the moment when Foucault’s theorisation of ‘biopower’ is superseded by his concern with ‘governmentality’, that moment being January 1978, in the first lecture of that year at the Collège de France (2002, p. 178).¹³ To govern is therefore to conduct the conduct of human beings, on condition of specifying that this conduct pertains just as much to oneself as to others. That is why, Dardot and Laval state, government requires liberty as its condition of possibility: to govern is not to govern against liberty, or despite it; it is govern through liberty – that is, to actively exploit the freedom allowed individuals so that they end up conforming to certain norms of their own accord” (2013, p. 5). The term ‘governmentality’ was introduced to refer to the multiple forms of activity in which human beings, who may or may not be members of a ‘government’, seek to conduct the conduct of other human beings – that is, govern them (ibid., p. 5). As Nikolas Rose puts it, this ‘government’ includes all endeavours to “shape, guide, direct the conduct of others ... And it also embraces the ways in which one might be urged and educated to bridle one’s own passions, to control one’s own instincts, to govern oneself” (1999, p. 3).

Dardot and Laval’s primary thesis is that ‘neoliberalism’ constitutes a new mode of ‘governmentality’. “The main innovation of neoliberal technology”, they write, “precisely consists in directly connecting the way a person “is governed from without” to the way that “he governs himself from within”” (2013, p. 264). The shift is pinpointed to have occurred in the last four or five decades, in which the crisis of the 1960s and 1970s was not merely an economic crisis but a crisis of *governmentality*; it is to this that neoliberalism responded (p. 11). This topic has been notably addressed by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello in their book *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, which attempts to answer how a new strain of capitalism, what they call a “connexionist” or “network” variant, has come to be in France without having met with the various forms of organised resistance that one might have expected. What Dardot and Laval argue was mistaken in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, however, was that the claims made by the new capitalism about itself in the managerial literature of the 1990s had been accepted by the authors as valid (p. 262). That is to say, the claim was that the decline of the “social critique” and comparative flourishing of the “artistic critique” of May ’68 *had* led to a new spirit that was in many ways preferable to the old, when in fact there had simply been a transition into a more ‘individualized’ and more ‘competitive’ phase of bureaucratic rationalisation.¹⁴ If David Harvey is correct to argue that: “[n]eoliberalism...has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey, 2007, p. 3), then perhaps Boltanski and Chiapello’s oversight can be attributed to the veracity of this very claim.

Dardot and Laval pick out several central features of this new mode of governmentality, being relatively faithful to Foucault in the process. For Foucault, neoliberalism makes the process of economic activity the centre of social and political relations, but unlike classical liberalism, in which exchange was the basis of society, the true focus is not exchange – it is *competition* (2008, p. 12). ‘Competition’ then, is one of these features. Whilst exchange was considered to be natural, competition was understood to be an artificial relation that needed to be protected by the state against the tendency for markets to form monopolies (Foucault, 2008, p. 139). For Dardot and Laval, neoliberalism cannot be reduced to the Marxist lens of the spontaneous expansion of the commodity sphere and the field of capital accumulation;

¹³ Foucault introduces the year’s theme as being what he had called ‘biopower’ but goes on, in the fourth lecture of that year, to say that what he is really concerned with is “a history of “governmentality”” (Foucault, *Governmentality*, 1991 [1978], p.102[655]). After that point, ‘biopower’ disappears from Foucault’s vocabulary.

¹⁴ As Sebastian Budgen summaries, “The flexible network is presented as a distinct form between market and hierarchy, whose happy outcomes include *leanness* of the enterprises, *team-work* and *customer satisfaction*, and the *vision of leaders* or *coordinators* (no longer managers) who *inspire* and *mobilize* their operatives (rather than workers)” (Budgen, 2000, p. 153).

it is a unique ‘economico-institutional form’ not directly deducible from the logic of capital but the contingent effect of legal rules (2013, p. 10). In this, they differ from other commentators who have placed it as “an ideology that is generated not from the state, but from the experience of buying and selling commodities from the market, which is then extended across other social spaces to become an image for society” (Read, 2009, p. 26).

The other features include the calculative tendency to couch everything in terms of interests, returns, and risk. In so doing, what has been lost is the tactical polyvalence of discourse (Foucault, 1987 [1976], p. 101). This tendency to totalise has been referred to as a “world-reason” (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 3). As a rationality, it is characterised by its claim to neutrally mirror reality – the anthropology of man as an economic and competitive creature – while actually inculcating and concretising that reality (Lemke, 2002, p. 60) since the state actively channels flows of interest and desire by making desirable activities inexpensive and undesirable activities costly, counting on the fact that subjects calculate their interests (Read, 2009, p. 29). For Jameson, as for many other commentators, the ‘naturalness’ of neoliberalism must be furiously contested: “[t]he market is in human nature’ is the proposition that cannot be allowed to stand unchallenged; in my opinion, it is the most crucial terrain of ideological struggle in our time” (1990, p. 263).

The calculative tendency requires not compulsion but ‘freedom’ as its condition of possibility, as Foucault remarked:

The new governmental reason needs freedom; therefore, the new art of government consumes freedom. It must produce it, it must organize it. The new art of government therefore appears as the management of freedom, not in the sense of the imperative: “be free,” with the immediate contradiction that its imperative may contain...[T]he liberalism we can describe as the art of government formed in the eighteenth century entails at its heart a productive/destructive relationship with freedom. Liberalism must produce freedom, but this very act entails the establishment of limitations, controls, forms of coercion, and obligations relying on threats, etcetera (Foucault, 2008, p. 63).

What is acted on by neoliberalism are the *conditions* of actions, not the *curtailment* of actions through threats of punishment.¹⁵ These conditions are perpetuated through a “chain reaction” in which “enterprising subjects” in turn reproduce, expand, and reinforce competitive relations between themselves through their own voluntary actions (Dardot & Laval, 2014). The injunction for neoliberal subjects, it could be said, is deeply held and subconscious, seemingly originating from within. Dardot and Laval put it as follows: “Each individual must work at their own efficiency, at intensifying their own effort, as if this self-conduct derived from them, as it is was commanded from within by the imperious order of their own desire, which there is no question of resisting” (ibid.). Government imposes freedom on the subject, it installs freedom as a central characteristic of modern subjectivity and, having done so, perhaps it should not be very surprising if there are consequences like ‘voluntary inservitude’ and ‘reflective indocility’ (O’Leary, 2002, p. 114). However, as the above passage also makes clear, this does not mean that forms of coercion or threats do not have a role to play; Foucauldian discipline is not eventually rendered redundant.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the transition to governmentality via biopower does signal what Jeffrey

¹⁵ As Rose puts it, “To govern is to act upon action. This entails trying to understand what mobilizes the domains of entities to be governed...To govern humans is not to crush their capacity to act, but to acknowledge it and to utilize it for one’s own objectives” (Rose, 1999, p. 4). Here, the phrase “one’s own objectives” might be taken to imply that governmentality is consciously engineered for the benefit of the few individuals in power. However, Rose makes clear that it is a form of rationality, “a set of “intellectual techniques” for rendering reality thinkable and practicable” (Rose, 1996, p. 42).

¹⁶ Elsewhere, Foucault seems to subsume biopower under the development of discipline, and indeed of sovereignty: “discipline was never more important or more valorized than at the moment when it became important to manage a population...in its depths and details...Accordingly, we need to see things not in terms of the replacement of a society of sovereignty by a disciplinary society and the subsequent replacement of disciplinary society by a society of government; in reality, one has a triangle, sovereignty-discipline-government, which has as its primary target the population and its essential mechanism the apparatus of security” (Foucault, 2003, p. 243).

Nealon (2008) calls an “intensification”, with its Deleuzian connotations, of power.¹⁷ It can essentially be summed up as the operation of power finding ways to be efficient at less cost.

3. Contemporary subjectivity

It may be asked whether it was a change in subjectivities that prompted the shift in governmentality, or vice versa. Arguments have certainly been presented either way, whilst the intricacies of the intersections between the local and the global further complicate this question, making any kind of answer seem either insipid or overly generalising. In any case, it is perhaps necessary to extricate the contemporary subject, as a category, apart from questions of governmentality and totality in order to understand the conjunction between subject-as-player and game, at least to the extent that these two categories impart some degree of manageability to the analysis.

A particular kind of subject has lately received the theoretical attention that attributes to it the status of being indicative of a key form of contemporary subjectivity: the new hypermodern, flexible, precarious, fluid, streamlined individual produced by ‘post-disciplinary’ technologies – the neoliberal subject – that is fashioned by more than merely the training and rendering docile of bodies, but by a mode of governmentality in which subjects must be fully involved in the activity that they are required to perform (Dardot & Laval, 2013; Wark, 2007; Dyer-Witthford & Peuter, 2009; Humphreys, 2008), or what Weber (1978) called ‘legitimate’ domination: a form of domination actively and willingly performed in different ways by each individual.¹⁸ The neoliberal subject in question, *Homo economicus*, is a fundamentally different being to *homo juridicus*, or the legal subject of the state, structured by different motivations and governed by different principles (Read, 2009, pp. 28-29).¹⁹ Rights, obligations and laws have been superseded by interest, investment and competition, driven by desires and aspirations, as the terms of the mode of governmentality. The connection with the ethicoaesthetic project of self-construction was perhaps most explicitly hinted at when Foucault declared that “*homo economicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of *himself* [emphasis added]” (Foucault, 2008, p. 226).²⁰

At the core of this subject is the old search for (since modernity) authenticity and meaning, but which has come to take the present form of the imperative to realise oneself, to fulfil one’s potential through one’s work, which is more closely identified with the self. For Kirkpatrick, citing Boltanski and Chiapello, this was born out of capitalism’s subsumption of the ‘artistic critique’, a shift in the 1960s and 70s that could be understood as a crisis of governmentality that was intertwined with a crisis in the forms of subjectivity that would accompany it; this has led to a situation where “the demand for authenticity... [leads to an] increase in paranoid behaviour by people who are forever fearful that they have been manipulated” (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 7). The crisis of the 60s and 70s was that of a yearning for more ‘playfulness’ and can be understood as a revivification of play since it had been downgraded in the age of industrial modernity (Kirkpatrick, 2015, p. 4). People’s relationship to their work changed; they were no longer bound by the working day but felt that the work connected with them as individuals in a manner that had not been the case before. However, as we have seen, these gains were deemed to be largely illusory for Dardot and Laval, and people still worked under competitive conditions for an organisation. Further, the

¹⁷ Deleuze articulated the contrast between discipline and what he called the “society of control”: “In disciplinary societies, you were always starting all over again) as you went from school to barracks, from barracks to factory), while in control societies you never finish anything – business, training, and military service being coexisting metastable states of a single modulation” (Deleuze, 1997, p. 179).

It is important to note that the role that “intensification” plays for Nealon is to connect together the stages of Foucault’s work, enabling “power” to then be the unifying thread against the view that the emphasis on an aesthetics of subjectivity in the late work was indicative of a jettisoning of a theory of power that had proven to be too totalising (Wortham, 2008, p. 375).

¹⁸ Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter have remarked that interactivity “intensifies the sense of free will necessary for ideology to work really well. Players, of their own choice, rehearse socially stipulated subjectivities” (2009, p. 192).

¹⁹ There had always been, in liberal democracies, a tension between two parts of the modern subject: “the citizen endowed with inalienable rights and the economic actor guided by self-interest; human as “end” and human as “instrument”” (Dardot & Laval, 2014). This tension is upset under neoliberalism.

²⁰ *Homo economicus* is characterized as one who is “his own capital...his own producer...himself the source of earnings” (Foucault, 2008, p. 226).

anxiety of just being a cog in a machine may drive the individual to perform more efficiently in the quest for freedom, to (ironically) see themselves as ‘human capital’ to be indefinitely increased and to thereby desire the putative freedom of self-construction. That is to say, the contemporary subject seeks to embrace their individuality through work (and play) that reflects who they believe they genuinely are, which tends to be competitive and sought-after, and thereby calls for habitual sacrifice and exploitation. There is a mode of preparedness to work particularly hard at something deemed authentic or enjoyable. Yet this search for freedom is the very basis of the pervasive unfreedom.

Roger Caillois (1967 [1958], p.141) had argued that the prevalence of a particular kind of play was not yet a matter of the personal taste of individual subjects, but stemmed from the collective cultural patterns in which they lived. Whilst this is a view that has been qualified by subsequent commentators, we can note the evident postmodern objection before mitigating that critique. The postmodern subject’s relationship to culture is said to be one in which the latter does not form “a dominant pattern, paradigm and context (‘a map of behaviour’)” but instead fulfils the role of “baggage, arsenal, reservoir of possibilities from which the subject can make his own choice when writing his own scenario (‘a map for behaviour’)” (Minnema, 1998, p. 36). This comparatively recent aestheticisation of the self, however, falls precisely into the ambivalence of self-construction at stake here; it is not an unbounded freedom for the subject to be their own author, but can be seen as a consequence of the shift to more flexible forms of control. It is not that culture is no longer a governing force – it has come simply to produce outcomes that are less concrete or determinate insofar as it has come to be about self-construction, or more heterogeneous forms of homogeneity that are very different to the older forms of homogeneity perpetuated by mass media.

4. Playing on the boundaries of the gameplay condition

In contrast to some classic games that simply escalate in difficulty, like *Tetris* or *Pacman*, contemporary single-player RPGs are more varied in what they demand from players – comparatively more heterogeneous in this respect. Additional and further gameplay at higher levels in those classic games was arguably qualitatively of the same kind, only speedier, more intense, less forgiving of mistakes. Although players may have found that the strategies that they had hitherto employed were no longer adequate at the higher levels, they could be certain of what came next were they able to pass the level; this could be framed as a straightforward ‘gameplay contract’ between the player and the game.²¹ If the player did not enjoy the game, its rhythms, the aporias and epiphanies of its challenges, they would know that there was little point in progressing to play ‘more of the same’. On the other hand, contemporary RPGs could be described as, using terms that Dardot and Laval employ to explicate practices and techniques of governmentality used to create a self that approximates to an ideal proposed in discourse, comparatively more “pragmatic and solution-orientated” (2013, p. 271) in tone; they feature a disparate range of challenges that may be unenjoyable, existing alongside more enjoyable ones, yet are often necessary not only for unlocking another part of the game but for the realisation of the player’s self-set goals. This emphasis on anticipation and deferral is prevalent among many games across different genres, perhaps especially so in RPGs insofar as they can be said to be genre of ‘grinding’. However, it is self-set nature of this deferral that is of particular interest here, and the relationship between this and neoliberal self-fashioning or *autopoiesis*.

Almost all single-player games make the player responsible for, at the most foundational level, the continuation or discontinuation of the game; more refined distinctions are of course possible given the inherently algorithmic and numeric/quantitative nature of computer games that make them highly suitable for performing the kinds of calculation that can provide near-instant *evaluative* feedback to the player that assist in learning and self-monitoring. However, my point here is that the gamic compulsion at work in some games arguably relies not so much on the player’s need to defeat an obstacle or complete a challenge – and not giving up until it has been done, than it does on far less ‘disciplinary’ means of

²¹ Bernard Suits had described the “lusory attitude”, or the willingness to play through submitting to “games [as] rule-governed activities” (Suits, 2005 [1978], p. 35). The idea of a ludic or ludonarrative contract has also been written about by Miguel Sicart, who has drawn upon Badiou’s concept of the ‘event’ to propose that the “player as subject” is created only when they are faithful to the series of imperatives and the delimited boundaries that are imposed by the game (Sicart, 2009, p. 71).

procedurally gauging success or failure, on the player's assessment of their own play in accordance with their own expectations and evaluation. It is in this sense that we might discern an accord between the changing landscape of games, and the "intensification" of techniques of governmentality that depend upon freedom outlined above.

Players who are less experienced with computer games or RPGs will, no doubt, place greater reliance on the game's feedback to ascertain how they are faring, being less able to both determine it themselves and to set aims independent of the game's instructions. There is much to be said then about the sort of gaming literacy that is incrementally acquired, and which, with the increasingly mainstream nature of computer games, including RPGs, is perhaps more widespread than it ever was. This literacy brings with it the ability to make educated guesses about the mechanics of the game, which then informs the player's own commitments regarding how they would like to play the game and what they would like to get out of it, leading to the aforementioned *self*-monitoring. If the ludo-literate gamer is better able to set their own goals, and to set ones that do not necessarily accord with the most self-evident gaming practices (they have the sufficient literacy to know against what one might 'stray afield' or wander away from), then they are situated on the precipice of conformity and the kind of 'knowledge' that Foucault thought was required to facilitate the project of detachment: on the one hand, they have arguably imbibed the requisite rationality, but on the other, they may also be in a position to wander away from it, or at least its most codified aspects.

Olli Leino has identified three modes of solitary play with regard to the involvement of the game artefact and the imposition of the 'gameplay condition' (the rule-bound conditions of possibility shared by all players of the same game):

mere *playing* (as in a child's freeform play), *playing with* a single-player computer game (as in freeform play involving a single-player computer game), and *playing a single-player computer game*. The first activity is not delineated by a gameplay condition. The second may be, but this condition is not, however, enforced anywhere else but in the player's mind. In the first and second cases, playing is a project like any other project one might take on, and can be thus reshaped and restructured at will. The last of the activities is delineated by the gameplay condition and the condition is enforced by the materiality of the game artefact" (Leino, 2010, p. 153).

I am interested in the boundaries between the second and third kind of case, between the more freeform playing with a computer game, and playing it. Leino states that the second kind of case is enforced only in the player's mind. This is further elaborated upon through Leino's explanation of Costikyan's distinction between "explicit" and "implicit goals" (2002, pp. 11-14). *SimCity* (1989), for Costikyan, contains no explicit goals, which may be described as the "victory conditions" that terminate gameplay upon being met, but instead "allows players to choose their own goals" (2002, p. 13) and is amenable to so many goal-directed behaviours. Leino adds that if one were to strive towards one's own goal, an example being that of attempting to replicate a real-life neighbourhood representationally in the game, this endeavour can fail in one of two ways: by not resembling its counterpart, or by causing the player to run out of resources during the construction, thus being unable to complete it (2010, p. 139). Only a failure of the second kind leads to the end of play, since it means that the gameplay condition, or the goals encoded into the game's materiality, have no longer been fulfilled. This is not to say, however, that failure to meet the so-called implicit goals will not result in the termination of play; a player may be so upset that the neighbourhood is not a good likeness that they load back to the moment when they began its construction, but it is not a termination that is enforced by the game. But this kind of distinction, between the material demands of the game and the psychology of the player, finds a clear trajectory in the study of games and play; Caillois, for example, had articulated the difference between the "purely formal qualities" and the "various psychological attitudes that govern play" (cited in Leino, 2010, p. 66).²²

However, returning to the issue of the boundaries between the second and third kind of case, there is arguably a sense in which the materiality of the game artefact has repercussions for the apparently idiosyncratic *playing with* that takes place. In order to make this kind of claim, we would have to move

²² This effectively branches into considerations of the attitudes that motivate playing the game in the first place.

away from clear delineations of conditions and requirements, and into the much more nebulous realms of gamic rationality or logic and its intersections with even broader concepts, such as neoliberal rationality. It is certainly not the case that there is no gameplay condition or invariant structure (Leino, 2010, p. 101) in the class of RPGs that I discuss. In addition, I do not think there is much to be gained by agonising over whether it is useful to label these games as ‘sandbox games’. Sandbox games raise the suspicion of not being games at all; Juul has, for example, discussed *The Sims 2* and *SimCity 4* as “border-line cases” (2003, pp. 39-40) of computer games, as they may be said to lack the necessary goals that seem a central feature of many other games. It would not be uncontroversial to label *Oblivion* as a ‘sandbox game’. Whilst it is possible to do the side-quests in any order, and there is a world to be freely roamed around, the nodes of the main quest arch are a series of predetermined events that move inexorably towards completion of the game’s narrative. But perhaps more pertinently, it is questionable whether anything is to be gained through deciding on the classification of ‘sandbox’; it is surely not impossible for a sandbox game to exhibit a particular ‘rationality’. There is no need here to dilute the claims about the importance of the *conjunction* between game and neoliberal rational subject or player: a particular engagement with a game requires an already fully-fledged type of player to play it rather than a *tabula rasa* player that is pliantly moulded by the game; but it is essential to assert that elements of the game may reinforce or tease out such a neoliberal rationality without explicitly enforcing particular actions or approaches as the gameplay condition.²³

5. Levelling up in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*

In *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, for example, the intricacies of the levelling up system can lead to a variety of player approaches that can be better understood through the lens of the aims that the player sets themselves rather than what is required in order to progress the game. As such, the relationship of the game’s rules to player actions is far from a deterministically disciplinary one that penalises the slightest nonconformist behaviour. The ways in which players construct their own objectives is of course informed by the parameters of the game, but the player is made to feel that there is an element of their own individuality in the manner in which they steer a particular course between meeting the basic demands and delving into the realms of min-maxing. Insofar as the difficulty setting can be adjusted to such a low level that it becomes almost inconceivable for even the most bumbling of players to defeat the daedra, undead, or brigands that they encounter, what is arguably more important than seeing the game as offering a series of challenges to be overcome is to see it as proposing a labyrinth of disparate opportunities for players to navigate themselves through it. In this sense, players’ own self-set goals are the means by which short-term, as well as longer-term objectives that structure the experience of gameplay are set. Players’ assessments of how well or poorly they meet those goals, and their difficulty, provide much of the aporias and epiphanies that constitute the playing of the game.

The level-up system forms perhaps the central consideration to any plans that a player sets for their self-set character development, being the means by which the player can exert control over the possible interactions with the game world, with hostile and friendly NPCs. It will be helpful here to give a brief outline of the slightly Byzantium structure of *Oblivion*’s levelling system. At the outset of the game, as players create a custom character (there is also the option of picking a pre-set one) for themselves that they will pilot through the game in the pre-set quest to save Tamriel from the dreaded Mehrunes Dagon, they have to make two decisions that impact upon the criteria which govern character levelling-up. First, they have to decide on one ‘Specialization’ out of ‘Combat’, ‘Magic’ and ‘Stealth’. Second, they have to decide on seven ‘Major Skills’ out of the full list of twenty-one possible ‘Skills’ (see the first column of fig.), with the rest becoming ‘Minor Skills’. Level-ups are achieved by levelling up any combination of these Major Skills so that they total ten. The ones I picked in my playthrough were: Armorer, Blade, Blunt, Hand to hand, Alchemy, Marksman, and Speechcraft. So if I had just levelled, and they were all at level 50, and I levelled Blade by a further five and Armorer by five, my character will have gained another level. As with almost all RPGs, Skills are levelled by using them repeatedly, with the ‘experience’ yielded by an action, such as hitting a target with a bladed weapon (Blade) being a set quantity, and the amount of

²³ The complexities of this ‘reinforcing’ or ‘teasing out’ warrant further study. It goes to the heart of the player-game distinction and brings out another concept that has been too little explored in game studies – the “implied player” (Aarseth, 2007).

experience required to reach the next level of Blade increases in line with the level attained. All Skills are divided into one of three ‘Specializations’, which, as stated, are Combat, Magic and Stealth. Under Combat falls: Armorer, Athletics, Blade, Block, Blunt, Hand to Hand and Heavy Armor; Magic governs: Alchemy, Alteration, Conjunction, Destruction, Illusion, Mysticism and Restoration; whilst Stealth covers: Acrobatics, Light Armor, Marksman, Mercantile, Security, Sneak and Speechcraft. Major Skills improve more quickly than do Minor Skills, as do Skills that fall under the character’s chosen Specialization.²⁴

It should by now be clear that the choice of Major Skills determines the level-up criteria. Characters gain bonuses to their Health (10% of their Endurance) at each level-up, along with three Attribute increases (up to +5 for each) and the opportunity to use equipment or pursue quests with certain level requirements.²⁵ It is the manner by which Attributes increase that is of particular interest here. Each Skill corresponds with an Attribute, as shown in (fig. 1). Armorer, for example, is governed by Endurance (End), whilst Blade is governed by Strength (Str). An Attribute increase of +5 each can be obtained only if a mix of Skills corresponding to that Attribute has been levelled by double that number, i.e., by ten, at the moment of level-up, calculated in comparison to the numbers at the point of the previous level-up. For instance, Endurance can be raised by +5 if, during the course of a single level-up, the player had increased Armorer by two, Block by six, and Heavy Armor by two, which add to be ten. Two other Attributes, say Strength (Str) and Intelligence (Int), could also have been raised in a similar way at that level-up. There are eight Attributes, and whilst it is difficult to generalise about what they do, it could be said that they work as resources that the player can draw upon – a higher Fatigue or Magicka pool in the case of Endurance and Intelligence, respectively – or, among other things, enhance the damage of ranged weapons (Agility) or increase the rate of Magicka regeneration (Willpower).

Skill	Att	Action	Exp./Action	Total Actions (Base)	Total Actions (Spec)	Total Actions (Major)	Total Actions (S+M)	Training Tip (complete tips are provided on skill pages)
Combat Skills								
 Armorer	End	each use of a repair hammer	1.5	6,812	5,109	4,088	3,066	Create a custom 3 point, 1 second <u>Disintegrate Armor</u> , then cast repeatedly and repair armor after each cast, the <u>Amulet of Disintegration</u> could also be used.*
 Athletics	Spd	time (secs) spent running	0.03	94.6 hrs	70.5 hrs	56.4 hrs	42.6 hrs	Run whenever possible.
		time (secs) spent swimming	0.04	70.9 hrs	53.2 hrs	42.6 hrs	31.9 hrs	Use <u>Water Breathing</u> and auto-swim against an object.
 Blade	Str	each hit on a target	0.5	20,435	15,327	12,261	9,196	See <u>General Combat Strategies</u> .
 Block	End	each blocked hit	1.25	8,174	6,131	4,905	3,679	
 Blunt	Str	each hit on a target	0.5	20,435	15,327	12,261	9,196	
 Hand to Hand	Str	each hit on a target	0.6	17,030	12,773	10,218	7,664	
 Heavy Armor	End	each hit taken	1.25	8,174	6,131	4,905	3,679	
Magic Skills								
	Int	each potion created	5.0	2,044	1,533	1,227	920	Create <u>Restore Fatigue</u> potions, <u>Farms</u> can

²⁴ Major skills can be levelled up more quickly - only 60% of the base experience is needed when compared to a minor skill. That is to say, six casts of a fireball spell, for example, against an enemy will yield as much experience as ten casts if Destruction were a minor skill. Skills that fall under the Specialization of the class (Combat, Magic, or Stealth) also level faster, needing only 75% of the base experience. If a skill is both a Specialization and a major skill, it will require only 45% of the base experience.

²⁵ Instead of a +5 in an Attribute, it is possible to opt for a +1 in Luck, which, although technically an Attribute, is particularly powerful in that a Skill is increased by 40% of however many points of Luck a character has over 50; e.g., for a Luck of 60, influenced skills are increased by 4 (40% of 10). Consequently, some efficient-levelling players may choose the Luck route, getting +5, +5, +1 to Attributes rather than three +5 increases. For the sake of simplicity, I have omitted this possibility from further discussions.

		each ingredient eaten	0.5	20,435	15,327	12,261	9,196	provide an abundance of ingredients for this.
 Alteration	Wll	each spell cast with a valid target	4.0	2,555	1,917	1,533	1,150	Create a <u>custom Shield</u> spell (3 points, 1 second) (or use <u>Protect</u>) and cast repeatedly.*
 Conjuration	Int	each spell cast with a valid target	6.0	1,703	1,278	1,022	767	Create a <u>custom Summon Skeleton</u> spell with a duration of 1 sec and cast repeatedly or cast <u>Summon Skeleton</u> and use <u>Turn undead</u> on the skeleton repeatedly.*
 Destruction	Wll	each spell cast with a valid target	1.2	8,514	6,386	5,109	3,832	Create a <u>custom Weakness to Element</u> on self (3 points, 1 second) repeatedly or use <u>Entropic touch</u> on a valid target repeatedly.*
 Illusion	Per	each spell cast with a valid target	3.0	3,406	2,555	2,044	1,533	Create a <u>custom Light</u> spell (3 points, 1 second) (or use <u>Starlight</u>) and cast repeatedly.*
 Mysticism	Int	each spell cast with a valid target	3.0	3,406	2,555	2,044	1,533	Create a <u>custom Detect Life</u> spell (3 points, 1 second) (or use <u>Minor Life Detection</u>) and cast repeatedly.*
 Restoration	Wll	each spell cast with a valid target	0.6	17,030	12,773	10,218	7,664	Create a <u>custom Restore Fatigue</u> spell (3 points, 1 second) (or use <u>Minor Respite</u>) and cast repeatedly.*
Stealth Skills								
 Acrobatics	Spd	each jump or dodge	0.3	34,059	25,545	20,436	15,327	Mash the jump button while climbing a hill (or stairs), or stand underneath a low overhang (like a dock) and jump repeatedly.
		each damaging fall	3.0	3,406	2,555	2,044	1,533	
 Light Armor	Spd	each hit taken	1.5	6,812	5,109	4,088	3,066	See General Combat Strategies.
 Marksman	Agi	each shot hitting a target	0.8	12,772	9,579	7,664	5,748	
 Mercantile	Per	each sales transaction	0.4	25,544	19,158	15,327	11,495	Sell items one by one, not in stacks.
 Security	Agi	each tumbler fixed	1.5	6,812	5,109	4,088	3,066	Fix the first three or four tumblers of a hard or very hard lock, then exit the menu; repeat.
		each click of the Auto-Attempt button						
 Sneak	Agi	time (secs) spent undetected while moving in sneak mode	0.75	3.78 hrs	2.84 hrs	2.27 hrs	1.72 hrs	Autorun in sneak mode next to a sleeping person
		each undetected opening and closing of pickpocket dialogue	2.0	5103	3834	3065	2322	The <u>Sneak</u> page has a list of people who don't mind being pickpocketed
 Speechcraft	Per	each turn (4 wedges) of minigame	2.4	4,258	3,194	2,555	1,917	Play the speechcraft minigame without trying to win
Skill	Att	Action	Exp./Action	Total Actions (Base)	Total Actions (Spec)	Total Actions (Major)	Total Actions (S+M)	Training Tip (complete tips are provided on skill pages)

Fig. 1: this table specifies which Actions are necessary to gain experience in each skill, and how many experience points are gained each time the action is done (Exp./Action). Under Total Actions the table provides the total number of actions necessary to train a skill from a level of 5 to 100 (assuming the skill is not a major skill or specialization skill). A few skills provide times in hours; in all cases, these are hours of real time. Training Tip provides a single suggestion for how to train this skill effectively for each action that trains the skill. Source: http://www.uesp.net/wiki/Oblivion:Increasing_Skills

Although the game says very little about these hidden operations, with the manual containing only limited information, numerous *Oblivion* forums are devoted to its explanation. This is in many ways unsurprising, since character ‘effectiveness’ can be plotted out from character level, and the levels of a character’s Attributes, ‘Derived Attributes’ (Health, Magicka, Fatigue, Encumbrance), and Skills. In order to consistently hit three +5 Attribute increases per level, a considerable amount of forward planning is required, which calls for a precise balancing of actions employed, from the number of blow struck with a bladed weapon to healing potions brewed or locks picked – every minutiae counts. ‘Over-lelling’ Skills leads to ‘waste’, since an Attribute could not be improved beyond +5 each level even if their governing Skills had gone up by more than ten; any amount more than ten could potentially impact upon future levelling: if all the Skills relating to Endurance, for example, had been levelled to 100 – the maximum –

then Endurance could not be raised at the next level-up since there could no longer be a ten point increase in the governing Skills.

It goes without saying that some players will have given no thought whatsoever to these mechanics, and simply played the game as it suited them. Indeed, it is crucial for our purposes that such players *could* complete the game, and could, especially if they had suitable combat strategies, hold their own at the higher difficulty levels. I do not mean to say that there is only one kind of player implied by the game, and that is the one who meticulously plots out what is to be done at every level. A good proportion of players, however, may have given varying degrees of thought to which Skills to level and when, and perhaps even to restart from the point where they picked their Major Skills so as to better control when level-ups occur. Choosing Blade as a Major Skill, and playing through the game with a bladed weapon gives the player little control over the rate at which Blade increases, since it will depend upon the rate of enemies at points in the game. As such, it is likely that by the time the player's Major Skills (including Blade) have increased by ten, levelling them up a level, they will not have levelled up other Skills to give two other Attribute increases. A player who wants to level-up with optimal effectiveness will need to, paradoxically, pick Major Skills that they can refrain from using until such time that they are ready to level-up. Repeatedly casting Conjuration spells or Sneaking around a sleeping NPC (only by successfully passing undetected does it count as a 'successful' use of Sneak) are good picks for Major Skills, assuming that there is no necessity to employ them when the player does not desire so. By placing these levelling considerations at the forefront of one's mind, *Oblivion* can quickly seem like a chore, like work rather than play. In order to alleviate the requisite tracking, there are such things as the 'skill diary mod' available to offer assistance.²⁶

It is 'work', however, that is pursued with myriad conceivable concrete goals in mind that can scarcely be exhaustively identified. One possible scenario involves the player who is after the 'feel' of how *Oblivion* plays once they have maxed out all Attributes excluding Luck at level 25, knowing that since enemies scale and level-up with the player, efficiently levelling to level 25 and then stopping means that they have reached a peak of in-game effectiveness. Another is where a player, knowing the difficulties associated with efficient levelling, aims to give themselves some leeway and reach maximum Attributes by level 30, which is perhaps also born out of wanting to face comparatively tougher opponents than would have been the case at 25. A third possibility is the player who simply wants to reach the highest level possible, by reaching 100 in all their Skills. Given that going to prison decreases the character's Skills, allowing them to be levelled up again (resulting in additional level-ups), this pursuit could result in the player repeatedly going to prison, perhaps because they want to face the strongest enemies possible, or to see if there is any cap on their possible level. In all of these possibilities, it would be reductive, given the complexity of the contextual factors, if not completely inaccurate, to hold that the pre-eminent motivation can be encapsulated by 'optimisation' but it would also be odd to dismiss the view that these goals can all be encompassed in some form under a pervasive 'world-reason'. The first approach is perhaps the most outrightly 'competitive'; the second is more pragmatic – a higher 'return' is sacrificed for a reduction of effort, and may evidence a mindset that is accustomed to balancing 'work' with leisure; the third shades into a kind of curiosity that desires to push boundaries and perhaps bodes the most promise, but may be indicative of the sort of entrepreneurial innovation that thinks within broadly the same parameters.

²⁶ <http://www.nexusmods.com/oblivion/mods/3629/>

For the purposes of the work/play distinction, it should not be neglected that the 'theorycrafting' component, or the detailed mathematical analysis of game mechanics, such as damage calculation, intersects with aspects of sociability and community recognition, and can also potentially be considered to be 'play', or part of playing the game for some. This also opens up to a wider discussion about the forms of sociality perpetuated through dialogue with other players grappling to find their own way through the game.



Fig. 2: Levelling-up, Attribute increases, and a motivational message

It is at this point that we can more readily perceive the complex conjunction between the kinds of rationality encoded into the game, and the orientation and desires of the gaming subject. Without this conjunction, without the compound ways in which the latter interacts with the former, the point of the game and the openness of its invitation to types of play do not take on the character that they do, and the ways in which the game can work to reinforce or tease out certain player goals in order for gameplay to continue would not occur. The implied player of the game is not necessarily the one who pursues the optimisation strategy, which is merely one path through the labyrinth of the game, but all those players who set 'appropriate' targets for themselves and make that a central part of their gameplay, and who are influenced by the clues in the game in the 'right way' so that gameplay within particular parameters is fostered. Yet it is only for this kind of player that the possibility of a wandering away or straying afield has ethicoaesthetic relevance. Otherwise, for a player who perceives the processual structure or logic of the game, such as levelling-up and eventually completing *Oblivion*, as absurd or alien, for whom there is a *disjunction* with the gameric cues, there is no possibility of such wandering. One has to register, as it were, the elements of world-reason within the possibilities of the game as well as within one's own concomitant desires. Following this, one then develops a particular aesthetic style that, insofar as it is possible, is made one's own, with which to respond to the irreducible ambivalence at stake – this is the Herculean task. A further question then becomes whether we prioritise the capacity of the work to effect this *autopoiesis*, through, for example, critiquing the processes encoded into the game, where a prevalent structure of quantifiable reward and struggle may incline us to conclude in the negative, for example, or the capacity of groups of players to seek out particular kinds of playing within the possibilities afforded by the games and cultivate the necessary style. To change the chemical reaction, one of the two reagents must be altered, even if subtly so. Further work would explore the details of this possibility without dismissing the influence of a pervasive world-reason as too totalising.

The exertion of this influence, of the techniques of governmentality, cannot be thought to be confined to the procedural aspects of the game alone, but is interwoven with representational and narrative aspects of the game. With every level-up in *Oblivion* (fig. 2), the player received a motivational message that is written in a form suggestive of it being their character's own ruminations (fig. 3): "You realize that all your life you have been coasting along as if you were in a dream... You resolve to continue pushing yourself... Today you wake up, full of energy and ideas". These have no gameric repercussions, but bracket what could have been for the player, a period of planning and grind, setting a particular tone for the ensuing gameplay. Level-ups occur after meeting the Major Skills criteria followed by sleeping for any amount of time; these messages perhaps resemble the first thought that one has in the day, after getting

out of bed. There is a prominent rhetoric of aspiration at work in them, where the imperatives are self-realisation and the fulfilment of one's potential. If only one worked a bit harder, concentrated a little more, mustered an iota more resolve, had a greater sense of purpose, reflected longer on the little things, then success surely awaits. This has, without a doubt, been written in a style that resonates with *Oblivion* players in order to speak vicariously to them through their character, not to exhort them to strive to achieve more with their lives of course, but to employ a language that will reinforce the sense of achievement and reward that they are gaining from playing the game and levelling up – that language being that of the techniques of “ultra-subjection” that Dardot and Laval had decried as geared towards only enhancing effectiveness, not towards the task of attaining a stable ethical relation to the self. There are possible parallels here with the theory of US psychologist Will Schutz, whose emphasis on seizing one's autonomy through the realisation of one's freedom, which is then translated into career-enhancing action, can be summed up as follows: “I choose my own life – my behaviour, thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories, health, everything – or I choose not to know I have a choice. I am autonomous when I choose the whole of my life” (Schutz, 1994). Yet on the other hand, a much more charitable reading of the tone and style makes it also arguably reminiscent of the Foucauldian interpretation of Seneca, whose writings became, for Foucault, more emblematic of what it was to be an ‘experience book’ than even the works of figures like Blanchot and Bataille had been.²⁷ According to Foucault, the Delphic inscription *gnôthi sauton* – a calling for self-knowledge – had been reinterpreted by Seneca to involve the claim that the self, envisaged almost as an interlocutor, needed a self-care, which bore far more positive connotations than Christian asceticism; his *vindica te tibi!* could be translated as “lay claim to yourself for yourself!”

Level	Message
2	You realize that all your life you have been coasting along as if you were in a dream. Suddenly, facing the trials of the last few days, you have come alive.
3	You realize that you are catching on to the secret of success. It's just a matter of concentration.
4	You've done things the hard way. But without taking risks, taking responsibility for failure... how could you have understood?
5	Everything you do is just a bit easier, more instinctive, more satisfying. It is as though you had suddenly developed keen senses and instincts.
6	You've learned a lot about Cyrodiil... and about yourself. It's hard to believe how ignorant you were, but now you have so much more to learn.
7	You resolve to continue pushing yourself. Perhaps there's more to you than you thought.
8	The secret does seem to be hard work, yes, but it's also a kind of blind passion, an inspiration.
9	So that's how it works. You plod along, putting one foot before the other, look up, and suddenly, there you are. Right where you wanted to be all along.
10	You woke today with a new sense of purpose. You're no longer afraid of failure. Failure is just an opportunity to learn something new.
11	Being smart doesn't hurt. And a little luck now and then is nice. But the key is patience and hard work.
12	You can't believe how easy it is. You just have to go... a little crazy. And then, suddenly, it all makes sense, and everything you do turns to gold.
13	It's the most amazing thing. Yesterday it was hard, and today it is easy. Just a good night's sleep, and yesterday's mysteries are today's masteries.
14	Today you wake up, full of energy and ideas, and you know, somehow, that overnight everything has changed. What a difference a day makes.
15	Now you just stay at your peak as long as you can. There's no one stronger in Tamriel, but there's always someone younger... a new challenger.
16	You've been trying too hard, thinking too much. Relax. Trust your instincts. Just be yourself. Do the little things, and the big things take care of themselves.
17	Life isn't over. You can still get smarter, or cleverer, or more experienced, or meaner... but your body and soul just aren't going to get any younger.
18	With the life you've been living, the punishment your body has taken... there are limits, and maybe you've reached them. Is this what it's like to grow old?

²⁷ As opposed to a ‘truth book’ or a ‘demonstration book’, which try to illuminate through didactic teachings, an ‘experience book’ reveals the taken-for-granted ways of knowing and doing in the present, which highlights the fragility of the present and the possibilities for change (Foucault, 2000 [1980], p.246). It is essentially aimed at inculcating the aforementioned ‘wandering’ or ‘tearing away’ in its readers from themselves.

19	You're really good. Maybe the best. And that's why it's so hard to get better. But you just keep trying, because that's the way you are.
20	By superhuman effort, you can avoid slipping backwards for a while. But one day, you'll lose a step, or drop a beat, or miss a detail... and you'll be gone forever.
21+	The results of hard work and dedication always look like luck. But you know you've earned every ounce of your success.

Fig. 3: vicariously realising things about yourself through a game character (level-up messages)

6. The form of contemporary single-player RPGs

Whilst the present case study concerns *Oblivion*, the conclusions that flow from it are generalisable to a certain extent to many single-player RPGs, but some commentary is required on the particular relationship between the non-processual form or style of single-player RPGs and *autopoiesis* or neoliberal self-fashioning. Single-player games offer a means for the relationship between the player and the materiality of the game to be scrutinised without the further complicating considerations of, first, a dimension of social interaction that influences or even dictates how a player negotiates the game, and second, that of the potentially unpredictable actions of other players in the game world who do not follow programmed modes of behaviour or pre-set probabilities.²⁸ That is to say, every gamic outcome in a single-player game is the product of the entanglement between the actions of the player and the programming of the game, tempered only by the culture of engagement and consumption that exists (the mediation of players by other players through walkthrough guides, for example (Ashton & Newman, 2010)).²⁹ In this respect, when the player is self-reflexive about their own play – including a possible gamut running from calculative self-assessment and appraisal, to emotive self-admonishment or dismay, or even epiphanic self-reflection, to the very formulation of objectives and desires – we need only consider that entanglement, which affords us greater diagnostic power with regard to the materiality of the game itself. By focusing on single-player games, the motivation is to get at this ‘core’ self-reflexiveness, which also subsists in multi-player games but is inflected by an array of additional considerations.³⁰ This is not to say that those considerations are simply appended onto the ‘core’; the particular balance and interaction between them is context-dependent and context-sensitive.³¹

In RPGs, the correspondence between the player and the avatar is of a sort that is different in kind to that between the player and a disembodied force that acts upon the game world, the latter of which is the case in many puzzle or strategy games, for example. Disembodiment is reminiscent of the experimental disintegration performed by Samuel Beckett (1991), whose works had a profound influence on Foucault, and who claimed that they enabled him to break free from the stultifying limitations of the triad of Marxism, phenomenology, and existentialism. Beckett disassembled his characters, and prompted his readers to question whether they could do without “organs”, “a sex”, “a nose”, “all the things that stick

²⁸ It should of course also be noted that any categorical distinction between single-player and multi-player games will not be uncontroversial, especially given the fact that many games feature both modes, and may offer the same levels or gameplay space to be taken on alone or with one or more partners temporarily (e.g. the *Dark Souls* series), or throughout the entirety of the game. The lone single-player does not exist in a vacuum oblivious to the manner in which other players have played the game.

²⁹ It should be remembered that the various forms of player behaviour that the rules may trigger, which impacts upon further behaviour, is not contained in the rules themselves (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 160). Nevertheless, the extent of these patterns of behaviour may be foreseeable, or bear a relationship to the rules that is definable in terms of another kind of meta-logic or rationale, even if it is almost impossible to exactly anticipate what that may be.

³⁰ It is to reduce, as it were, what Steinkhueler (2006) has described as the “mangle of play”, the way in which the game that is played is the outcome of a ‘mangle’ of various forces, including player and developer intentions, logics of production and consumption, the material constraints and affordances of the game, broader social norms and etiquette, etc.

³¹ The topic of governance and MMOGs has already been intelligently broached by several commentators, including Sal Humphreys (2008) and Julian Kücklich (2009). Sal Humphreys has canvassed four sites within MMOGs where attempts at governance can be discerned (Humphreys, 2008, p. 153). My interest for this paper lies with only the first of these, the level of code and rules (the others are: the relationship between publisher and players in the practices of community management; the forms of player-to-player interaction; and the constraints of End User Licence Agreements pertain).

out”, or even if it would be better to keep on saying “babababa” (pp. 305-8). In cases where the player ‘inhabits’ an avatar, the opportunity for confusion or conflation between what the player feels in response to events and what their in-game diegetic character is represented as feeling supplies a certain texture to the experience that does not have a corollary in cases where the player does not control an in-game avatar.³² Perhaps there are some *prima facie* reasons for thinking that cases of the latter kind are in some ways more explorative in the sense outlined above *pace* Beckett. Some games evidently pursue closer identification between player and avatar through various ludic affordances that attempt to convey a great deal about the character’s particular subjectivity, the way in which they experience the world, and their abilities; this has been referred to as, following Genette (1980), the “focalization” of the game (Allison, 2015). It is also possible, however, to not identify at all with one’s avatar, or to detach oneself from such a commitment.³³ Yet it is arguable that there is, what Nietzsche (1999 [1871]) would call an Apollonian principle of individuation, which clarifies out ethical orientation and sense of self, at work in some RPG games that is evidently opposed to a Dionysian force of disarticulation, which is associated with the experiences of ecstasy and horror, and which explodes and undercuts stable forms of subjectivity.³⁴ There is a wilful conflation inculcated through the game design, in the way that the player is encouraged to name their character, to personalise him, her or it, and the technique in which the game uses the second-person personal pronoun ‘you’ to refer to the player and diegetic character, a conflation between the achievements and failures of the character and that of the player: gaining proficiency, overcoming adversity, saving the world. The transformative potential of playing the game, the potential for *autopoiesis* rather than neoliberal self-fashioning, lies in the extent to which the player imposes their ‘everyday’ values and norms upon the gameplay. Maurice Blanchot, whose work Foucault also had deemed worthy of the category ‘experience book’, had remarked that “What most threatens reading is this: the reader’s reality, his personality, his immodesty, his stubborn insistence upon remaining himself in the face of what he reads” (1982, p.198). RPGs, insofar as they may boast genre conventions that tend to be Apollonian in orientation, perhaps fall foul of this principle.³⁵

³² Sicart conceives of describing certain gameplay experiences as a temporarily adopted virtual skin (via the game) “that is both ‘oneself’ and ‘other,’ because it has a component of strangeness that puts the player in contact with the virtual world” (Sicart, 2009, p. 78). The metaphor of the skin, he writes, “connects the internal, individual subjectivity of the player with the larger communitarian, cultural and historical subjectivities of the contemporary self” (Sicart, 2009, p. 79).

A single in-game avatar with a particular subjective experience of the game world is not unproblematic here, as RPGs seldom confine the player to controlling a single character at all times, nor a strict first-person perspective – the player does not come to ‘inhabit’ a virtual body with all the sensory information and limitations that this would entail. Clearly, more work is required to better articulate the nature of this relationship and the conventions at work. Nevertheless, commentators have written about how players not only identify with their avatar, but selectively adjust their identity to reflect that of their avatar (Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2009).

³³ De Wildt argues, drawing upon Ernst van Alphen’s analytical distinction between three ideological-linguistic subjects, that a tripartite distinction should be drawn between: (i) the external player or interpreting-subject sitting behind the computer; (ii) the playing-subject in the mediated presence of the game, and (iii) the interpreted-subject, or the character which we control and to which we relinquish control at the whim of the narrative (de Wildt, 2014, p. 9).

³⁴ We can recall here Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s claims that playing *Second Life* is very much like living one’s ‘first’ life, that there is a ‘rehearsal’ taking place (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. xii). Later on, they also discuss how game virtualities prepare us for the normalised subjectivities of a global capitalist order - consumer, commander, commanded, cyborg, criminal (p. 192). Whilst straightforward ‘rehearsal’ seems inadequate to describe the complexity of what is going on, there are undoubtedly some elements of individuation at stake.

³⁵ It is beyond the present scope of this paper to examine the Apollonian and Dionysian in more detail, particular the political and ethical possibilities inherent within the Apollonian.

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