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# Videogames, Identity and Digital Subjectivity

Rob Gallagher

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This book argues that videogames offer a means of coming to terms with a world that is being transformed by digital technologies. As blends of software and fiction, games are uniquely capable of representing and exploring the effects of digitization on day-to-day life. By modelling and incorporating new technologies (from artificial intelligence routines and data mining techniques to augmented reality interfaces), and by dramatizing the implications of these technologies for understandings of identity, nationality, sexuality, health and work, games encourage us to playfully engage with these issues in ways that traditional media cannot.

**Rob Gallagher** is a Postdoctoral Researcher based at King's College London, UK. As part of the Ego-Media team, his research addresses the impact of new technologies on notions of identity and practices of self-presentation. His work has appeared in *Games and Culture*, *Film Criticism* and *The New Inquiry*.

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# 1 Digital Subjects

## Videogames, Technology and Identity

This book makes two claims. The first is that digital technologies are fostering new conceptions of subjectivity and identity. It holds that social networks and smartphones, augmented reality interfaces and biometric sensors, artificial intelligence systems and, indeed, videogames are all changing how we see ourselves, both as individuals and as human subjects. The second claim is that digital games have emerged as a fictional form uniquely equipped to address these changes. If videogames are often framed as symptoms or drivers of a shift towards digital subjectivity, then critics tend to be less willing to acknowledge that they might also be expressive works with things to *say* about this shift. Across close contextual readings of a wide range of titles, this book makes that case, showing how games get to grips with the implications of digitization in a range of complex and imaginative ways. Like other fictional forms, videogames use words and images, sounds, symbols and spatial metaphors to communicate. But they also ask players to cultivate an understanding of the rules and probabilities, interfaces and economies that structure their virtual worlds. They are simultaneously ludic systems, digital architectures and expressive fictions. If, as fictions, they adapt techniques, scenarios and figures familiar from literature, cinema, the visual arts, pop culture and myth, as software systems they incorporate or model a range of other digital forms (by, say, simulating social networks, mimicking smartphone interfaces or integrating image editing tools and digital shopfronts). By, for and about denizens of those parts of the overdeveloped world that have most enthusiastically adopted digital technologies, the particular games that this book addresses dramatize the effects of new technologies in ways that traditional media cannot, letting us playfully engage questions of identity and nationality, privacy and embodiment, work and space. What does this mean in practice? It means roleplaying games about becoming a reality TV star, gothic mysteries about haunted smartphones, social networking simulations set aboard space stations, augmented reality apps which project adorable monsters into everyday spaces, text adventures about training biomechanical horses and critiques of government surveillance in which we lock ourselves in a bathroom to take explicit selfies – to describe just a few of the games the book covers.

## Defining Digital Subjectivity

In arguing that fictional forms, media technologies and models of the subject develop in symbiosis, this book is hardly without precedent. Ian Watt (1959) long ago argued that the emergence of the novel, for example, is intimately bound up with the rise of the modern subject and bourgeois individualism, both recording and helping to effect 'the transition from the objective, social and public orientation of the classical world to the subjective, individualist and private orientation of the life and literature of the last two hundred years' (176). Nor do critics like Crary (2001) consider it a coincidence that cinema should have been roughly coeval with the psychoanalytic subject. Jonathan Beller (2006) goes so far as to argue that 'the unconscious is cinema's product', proposing that film provided a 'precursor of and model for the unconscious as it has been theorized during the twentieth century' (17, 18). The storytelling strategies and the forms of subjectivation that the novel and the feature film favour were already being challenged before videogames entered the frame. With the advent of television, moving images began to inveigle themselves into audiences' domestic spaces and quotidian routines. Soaps and serials drew viewers into prolonged, open-ended engagements with fictional people and places as discrete beginning–middle–end narratives were subsumed within the general televisual 'flow' (Warhol 2003; Williams 2004 [1974]). Advertisements and, later, music videos pioneered forms of address calculated to elicit affective attunement rather than rational comprehension. With cable and satellite came the rise of channel hopping – embraced by theorists of postmodernity as the perfect metonym for a culture felt to be schizophrenic or attention deficient – and a more 'interactive' relationship with media (Featherstone 2007, 5). Home shopping channels, Ceefax and Teletext, video diaries and reality TV began a blurring of fiction and reality, production and consumption that would be accelerated and exacerbated by the Internet. With changes to intellectual property law and the emergence of media conglomerates, meanwhile, came a new emphasis on extending 'transmedia storyworlds' across comic books, movies, novels, TV shows, toys and merchandise, web portals, stage shows, live events and tourist attractions (Ryan and Thon 2014).

In the process, videogames have emerged as a fictional form particularly well equipped to help us understand how digital technologies are redrawing the contours of subjectivity and identity. If games retain and remediate techniques familiar from prior media forms, this only makes them better qualified for this task, reflecting the fact that cultural shifts are neither smooth nor sudden, that digital subjects continue to orient themselves using what might seem like obsolete or anachronistic concepts even as they embrace new ones. What, though, is a digital subject? While the nature of digital subjectivity should be clearer by the end of

the book, there are six propositions I want to advance at this stage – propositions that will give a sense of why videogames have a special claim when it comes to capturing important dimensions of contemporary experience.

1 Digital subjects belong to a culture of data collection and demography, which treats individuals as ever-expanding masses of information waiting to be aggregated and analysed. In the 1990s, the emergence of the Internet fuelled liberal fantasies of 'colour-blind' tolerance and post-structuralist dreams of polymorphous identity play. Today, however, digital subjects are perpetually being sorted and 'cyber-typed' along lines of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, age, taste, socio-economic status and medical history (Nakamura 2002; Galloway 2011, 135–137). In the process, the biography, which narrates the individual life as a developmental arc following a logic of cause and effect, is being superseded by the profile, a collection of taxonomic and behavioural data, which becomes a basis for constructing new categories and speculating about future actions. Some profiles deal in fixed, objective and/or empirically verifiable characteristics (height, blood type, eye colour and so on), others in characteristics that are subjective, qualitative or subject to change (tastes, political affiliations, age); in some cases (as with a Facebook page or a LinkedIn profile) individuals will fill in and maintain their own profiles, while in others (as with the profiles Google assembles on the basis of users' browsing habits or the kill lists given to US drone pilots) this profiling will be automatic and covert.
2 Digital subjects express themselves via 'autobiographical performances' and playful acts of self-presentation, from selfies, blogposts and tweets to videogame 'Let's Play' videos (Papacharissi 2015, 98). These activities manifest an understanding of the self as a reflexive project pursued before an audience of potential followers, subscribers, lovers, employers and contacts. As Alexander Galloway (2011) argues, digital culture is founded on a perhaps unlikely combination of 'romanticism and cybernetic systems theory' (26, 28); where the influence of romanticism can be seen in online culture's celebration of 'creative' spontaneity and its emphasis on personal perspectives, its debt to systems theory is manifest in the multiplication of feedback mechanisms (likes, follows, subscriptions, replies, retweets) which sort social winners from losers. But where Romantic poets disavowed charges of egoism by pleading fealty to higher callings – divinity, nature, art, liberty and so on – digital culture inherits postmodernity's suspicion of grand narratives, transcendent signifieds and hoary traditions, prizing innovation, improvisatory élan and the capacity to adapt oneself to new roles, styles and contexts. Flexibility

becomes a key attribute: as consumers, digital subjects are expected to seek out new products and experiences; as professionals, they are required to adapt to the changing needs of a volatile labour market; as performers they are expected to keep their personal brands fresh and relevant.

3 The digital subject is very much embodied. That body, however, is increasingly understood in cybernetic terms, by way of 'human-computer metaphors' that frame it as a form of 'wetware' or a quasi-Cartesian vehicle requiring technocratic management and maintenance (Franklin 2015, xv). As these ideas have gained traction, familiar notions of interiority and psychological depth have come under strain. Where Enlightenment philosophers argued that 'man' was essentially rational, and where Freud posited an unconscious realm to which unacceptable memories, wishes and ideas were banished, in the era of the 'new unconscious' attempts to explain (and indeed to influence) our behaviour are more likely to draw on cybernetics, behaviourism, big data, game theory, genetics, neuroscience and evolutionary biology (Galloway 2011, 28). Subjects become 'black boxes', signal-processing mechanisms whose workings are knowable only to the extent that given stimuli reliably elicit given responses (Galloway 2012, 242; Franklin 2015, 92–93).

These developments have important repercussions for our understanding of agency. For transhumanists, new technologies promise to grant digital subjects greater choice and control, enabling us to transcend the limits and circumvent the 'bugs' evolution has bequeathed us. Behind these fantasies, though, lie fears of being out of control or subject to another's control, of technologies being used to circumvent our rational decision-making faculties and trick us into behaving against our best interests. If we can be patched and upgraded like digital systems, can't we also be hacked and (re)programmed? Such fears are intensifying as more authority is granted to human-engineered but increasingly autonomous algorithms and artificial intelligences. Where it was once possible to see technology as a means of prosthetically extending human capacities, Mark B.N. Hansen (2015) argues that today this is no longer the case (221); rather, digital subjects must share their sovereignty with nonhuman agents whose modes of apprehending and acting upon reality are often very different to ours.

4 The digital subject is networked, a node linked to other nodes by strong or weak ties to form the 'social graphs' that are superseding more established models for understanding relationships and communities. While this emphasis on collectivity and connection might seem to be at odds with my claim that digital culture is individualistic, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2016) explains that the brilliance of what she calls 'N(YOU) media' lies in their capacity to address

a 'you' that hovers between the singular and the plural (3–4). In digital culture, personal success entails expanding and effectively mobilizing one's contacts, and the winners are those who learn to navigate networks confidently. Digital subjects often express themselves through avatars, mouthpieces and aliases, using templates and stock formats (catchphrases, hashtags, fonts, memes) to mediate between the personal and the collective in ways calculated to foster connections and collective identities. As we will see in Chapter 3, they also seek to avoid 'context collapse' by tailoring their behaviour to the norms of the spaces in which they find themselves – be those spaces online, offline (or, as is increasingly the case) layered, hybrid environments (Marwick and boyd 2011).

5 For the digital subject, work and play may be hard to separate – a prospect by no means as utopian as it might sound. For Kirkpatrick (2013), videogames are a product of the shift towards a more 'ludic' model of capitalism, a shift which saw employers attempting to address growing dissatisfaction with the stultifying monotony and rigid hierarchies of the Fordist workplace by recasting work as more creative, fulfilling and flexible (27–30). This entailed capitalizing on the capabilities of information technologies to reorient overdeveloped economies away from industry and towards forms of immaterial, intellectual and affective labour in the creative and service sectors. The promise was of entrepreneurial individuals liberated to pursue forms of 'passionate work' suited to their abilities, interests and personal commitments (McRobbie 2016, 36). The reality, however, has been one of aggressive deskilling, greater precarity, fiercer competition and widening inequality, as training programmes, jobs for life, opportunities for advancement, pension funds and employment benefits are scrapped or curtailed along with the other perks and concessions put in place to reconcile workers to the Fordist order of things. As this suggests, while 'ludic capitalism' might sound more agreeable than its forebears, it is not just about 'paidiac' playfulness and creativity but also the drive to game the system, maximize advantages and exploit rivals' weaknesses (Caillois 2001 [1958], 27). Whether they are scrabbling for the next pitch, gig or short-term contract, striving to survive the next downsizing or attempting to build a lucrative personal brand, digital subjects are always playing the game. Meanwhile data mining has turned what were once leisure activities into a form of unpaid work, allowing companies like Google, Microsoft and Netflix to extract value from activities like browsing the web, playing games or watching movies. If videogames promise an escape from the stresses of professional life they also recapitulate ludic capitalism's logic of productivity and entrepreneurial endeavour – as we shall see in Chapter 7.

6 Finally, digital subjects play digital games. Where videogames were once a comparatively niche pursuit, today this is no longer the case. Retirees play *Scrabble* with family members via Facebook; commuters while away their train journeys with rounds of *Candy Crush*; Norwegian prime ministers are caught playing *Pokémon GO* in the middle of parliamentary debates (Cresci 2016). But while most people now have *some* experience of playing digital games, this does not necessarily mean they would describe themselves as 'gamers'. It's to this distinction and its implications that I want to turn now.

## Ludo Ergo Sum

When I refer to 'gamers' and 'gamer culture', I am talking about subjects who have made digital gaming a core part of their lives and identities. The term gamer brings with it a range of associations, and like all collective identities, it fits some of those it is applied to more snugly than others. Gaming enthusiasm also comes in many flavours: devotees of certain genres and platforms might spurn others, and passionate subcultures and fan communities often form around franchises and practices in which the majority of gamers might have no interest. There are, however, some important traits and tendencies that have long been characteristic of 'gamer culture' as a whole – or, at least of Anglophone gamer culture, on which this book focuses. Here Graeme Kirkpatrick's recent work on the genealogy of the 'gamer' archetype and of gaming as a cultural field becomes useful. He proposes that one of the key concepts around which gamer culture coalesces is that of 'gameplay', held to be the key quality that elevates some games above others and differentiates videogames as a form from other media (2013, 78–81). To appreciate 'good gameplay' is to appreciate digital games as finely tuned ludic structures, platforms for competition and opportunities to acquire and demonstrate a mastery of technology. As this suggests, while gamers certainly appreciate lore and trivia, pretty graphics, catchy soundtracks and memorable character designs, gamer culture is (as I discuss in Chapter 6) highly invested in the idea of seeing through the interface to discern the systems and mechanics that lie beneath. Gamer culture is also Janus-faced: rife with nostalgic affection for 'retro' games that become ciphers for lost childhoods, it also enthusiastically embraces new technologies, showing an unwavering faith in the ability of new hardware to open the way to play experiences more involving and rewarding than those that have come before. Beyond its privileging of gameplay, its fascination with new technologies and its nostalgic investment in the 'retro', however, gaming culture's key defining trait is its intimate but awkward relationship with the figure of the 'geeky' white, middle-class male (Thornham 2011, 50, 71; Kirkpatrick 2012; Shaw 2014, viii). For a long time, digital games were dismissed as the preserve of children, or else of nerds and

loners seeking consolation for their empty 'real' lives in fantasy worlds full of spaceships, sports cars, talking mushrooms and buxom ninja princesses. Significantly, Kirkpatrick (2012) shows that while we might have expected videogame enthusiasts to balk at the medium's ongoing association with juvenility, sexual inadequacy, flawed masculinity, 'social isolation and addiction', in fact the truth is more complex. Over its history, gamer culture has veered between rejecting and (more or less ironically) embracing these associations, which continue to shape it today. Indeed, I would argue that the 'constitutive tensions' and 'constitutive ambivalences' that Kirkpatrick highlights have only become more pronounced over the period this book covers (ibid.; 2013, 91).

That period begins in 2001. If the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon were a cultural turning point in all sorts of ways, there are, as Chapter 2 discusses, good reasons to see them as an important watershed for digital culture in particular. In gaming terms, meanwhile, 2001 saw an event that, while hardly as cataclysmic as 9/11, came as a blow to many gamers: the discontinuation of Sega's Dreamcast console and their withdrawal from the videogame hardware business. A forward-looking platform in many ways (and even an 'avant-garde' one (Montfort and Consalvo 2012)), the Dreamcast's demise capped a Cambrian decade for the games industry, a decade which saw new technologies driving an explosion of new genres, styles and concepts. Games colonized the third dimension, and play moved online. Budgets, production values and studio sizes ballooned in step with processor speeds and storage capacities. Control pads mutated rapidly, sprouting strange new appendages and assuming unwieldy shapes. With the PlayStation 2 (PS2) and the Xbox, however, the 'core' or 'triple A' games industry[1] began to settle into the shape it retains today (as, indeed, did console control pads). Having vanquished the Dreamcast, the PS2 would go on to become the best-selling console ever released, boasting a raft of influential titles that sought to integrate gaming's staples of combat, exploration, puzzle solving and traversal into unprecedentedly 'cinematic' narratives and sprawling open worlds. The Xbox, meanwhile, was significant as an American incursion into a console sector that had been dominated by Japanese companies since the 1980s, and began a process which would see the hitherto fairly distinct spheres of console gaming and Western PC gaming becoming increasingly intertwined. To compare the 2001 entries in the *Halo*, *Grand Theft Auto* or *Metal Gear Solid* series with their most recent counterparts is to see the extent to which the game industry has been content to refine the same core concepts for the same 'gamer' audience over the intervening years.

At the same time, however, the period since 2001 has seen the emergence of new platforms, genres, interface technologies and distribution channels that have radically expanded gaming's demographic reach while flaunting triple A orthodoxies. Nintendo's Wii, with its simple,

family-friendly games and its gesture-based interface proved hugely popular, fostering an image of gaming as an activity open to all ages and a means of cultivating togetherness and physical well-being; smartphones and tablets connected to online stores have removed the need for specialist hardware and fostered pick-up-and-play game concepts suited to touchscreen interfaces and the stop-start rhythms of contemporary life; the integration of gaming and social networking has made games seem like less of a lonely pursuit, while cheap, free and free-to-play[2] games have lowered financial barriers to entry (though, as we'll see, players of such games end up paying in other ways, using data, attention and contacts as proxy currencies). Juul (2010) frames these developments as part of a 'casual revolution' that has profoundly altered the games industry, proving that simple, upbeat, technologically primitive games can reach larger audiences (and generate bigger profits) than the photorealistic story-driven adventures, expansive 'open worlds' and mechanically intricate competitive multiplayer games favoured by those who define themselves as gamers.

Another challenge to the status quo has come from a florescence of 'indie', avant-garde and DIY game development, facilitated by new development tools and distribution platforms. Where triple A games are the product of large teams of professionals, with tens of millions of dollars behind them, working with publishers to produce technologically accomplished experiences meant to last players weeks if not months, 'indie' games, alt-games, artgames and notgames (to use a few of the terms which have gained momentum in recent years) adopt different approaches and address different audiences. The many forms these titles take speak to the ways in which gaming culture has developed and diversified over the last decade or so: some cater to a self-appointed 'hardcore' who feel that mainstream games have become too forgiving, or introduce ingenious mechanical wrinkles into familiar genres; some aim to stir nostalgia in veteran players or to address audiences turned off by the pervasive violence and/or the aesthetic conservatism of mainstream games; some tackle experiences of economic exploitation, gender dysphoria or mental illness; some function as toys, creative tools, stress relievers or artistic statements rather than 'games' per se. As gaming culture has expanded and diversified, however, it has also fragmented. We can see as much from the frequent, often fractious debates about what counts as a 'real' game and who counts as a 'real' gamer that have followed in the wake of Juul's casual revolution – debates that resonate throughout this book, but which are particularly central to Chapters 3, 6 and 7.

Like all identity work, the construction of gamer culture involved its fair share of othering and 'symbolic violence' (Kirkpatrick 2013, 91): in order to forge an image of 'gamers' as 'young, male and "cool"' subjects who 'appreciate gameplay and are good at it', early gaming culture began to define itself in opposition to those who did not meet these

criteria. If this meant jokes at the expense of women and older people, it also meant striving to differentiate gamers from enthusiasts next to whose *truly* nerdy hobbies (hobbies like trainspotting, stamp collecting or tabletop gaming) digital gaming could be considered exciting and subversive (ibid. 87). More than that, though, it entailed mockery of insufficiently skilled would-be-gamers, and of would-be-gamers wont to prize dazzling graphics or an absorbing plot above that ineffable but all-important criterion of compelling gameplay (ibid. 80). This kind of sniping continues today, and has become more visible and arguably more vituperative thanks to social media. 'Hardcore gamers' denigrate 'casual gamers'; PC gamers make fun of console owners; Xbox fans tease PlayStation fans; connoisseurs and collectors tut at 'jock' and 'bro' gamers who buy the same creatively bankrupt shooters and sports games year after year; right-wing gamers castigate leftists, liberals, hipsters and 'social justice warriors' for being pretentious or puritanical. The 2014 #gamergate farrago represented an alarming escalation of this tendency. As Golding and van Deventer (2016) recount, the controversy grew out of online gossip concerning indie designer Zoe Quinn. Amidst a welter of rumour and recrimination, orchestrated in part by Quinn's ex-boyfriend Eron Gjoni and amplified by Breitbart News and Adam Baldwin (who helped to propagate the hashtag), #gamergate became the rallying cry for a 'movement' which claimed to be fighting against journalistic corruption and what they saw as underhand attempts to force a liberal, progressive agenda on an unwilling games industry. In practice, this entailed bullying, harassing and issuing rape and death threats to female developers, academics, cultural critics and journalists accused of attempting to emasculate gamers and 'ruin' videogames (a claim it is hard to credit given how fond the triple A gaming sector remains of cars, guns, gore and gratuitous titillation).

The image of the gamer as a white, straight, cisgendered, middle-class male has never told the whole story, even in the days when gaming culture had a much narrower demographic reach (Shaw 2014, viii). Today it would be absurd and inaccurate to claim that all gamers are men, misogynists, addicts, adolescents or hermits. But it would be equally absurd to deny that, whatever individual gamers might feel about it, triple A videogaming in particular remains a bastion of hegemonic white heteromasculinity. Nor is there any point in denying the cultural purchase that the stereotype of the gamer as an overinvested male loner retains. Made by designers of various nationalities, ethnicities, gender identities, ages and sexualities, the games this book discusses can all be seen as reckoning with this notion of 'the gamer' in one way or another. And, whether they embrace this archetype, challenge it, queer it or seek to transcend it, their modes of doing so have consequences for our understanding of identity that resonate far beyond the confines of gamer culture. Indeed, one of the arguments this book makes is that

the figure of 'the gamer' also serves a number of important functions in digital culture, providing a pattern for how digital subjects ought, or ought not, to be. 'Gamification' evangelists see gameplay in terms of problem solving and teamwork, even as others associate it with solipsism and shiftlessness; gamers are sometimes portrayed as skilled operators of sophisticated technologies, sometimes as addicts at the mercy of devious cybernetic honey traps; on certain occasions, they embody digital culture's tendency towards playful exploration, experimentation and roleplay, while on others they incarnate its ruthlessness, its cynicism, its concern with statistics over stories.

## Studying Games Today

But perhaps we could forget about gamers for the moment and get back to games? Admittedly, this suggestion goes against the prevailing tendency in game studies. The discipline's early years have long been cast as a struggle between 'narratologists' for whom games were cultural texts amenable to critical methodologies adapted from film studies and literary theory and 'ludologists' adamant about the need to develop new modes of analysing and discussing videogames as ludic systems. If this framework has been criticized for reductively and inaccurately framing the field as a tug of war (Frasca 2003), one of the things it obscures is the extent to which both sides of the debate were focused on games rather than their players. As Miguel Sicart argued in a 2011 critique of Ian Bogost's (2007) notion of 'procedural rhetoric' – an influential bid to advance a critical framework capable of accounting for games as *both* expressive works and ludic systems – early game studies was often focused 'on how the designer or design team creates experiences by means of *designing systems*' rather than 'the presence of the player and play' (emphasis in original). In the years since Sicart's intervention there has arguably been a movement in the other direction, with many scholars focusing on how players use games as a basis for forging communities, constructing identities and originating new forms of play and creative expression that go beyond anything designers can have foreseen. While I draw liberally on this work, this book is primarily about videogames rather than their players. More than that, while it is alive to the many other things that videogames are (commodities, hobbies, systems, communications platforms, economies and Trojan horses for data mining software, to name a few), it mostly addresses them as fictions in which to play is to affect not merely the balance of a ludic system but also the conditions of a fictional world.

This may seem counterintuitive to many in game studies. It is, as such, worth explaining why I am taking this stance. The first thing to note is that I am less concerned with games as vehicles for more or less linear plots than I am in how they work as what Barry Atkins (2003) calls 'game-fictions' (20) – how they present scenarios that render ludic

outcomes significant or evocative. Some of the titles I analyse are more game than fiction, others (like the visual novels and text adventures addressed in Chapters 3, 4 and 7) are arguably more fiction than game. In both cases, though, it is what happens across that hyphen – be it graceful or awkward or complex – that renders them noteworthy as commentaries on digital subjectivity and identity. Atkins coined the term game-fictions in his book *More Than A Game*, released right in the middle of the putative ludology/narratology conflict. Revisiting it today, one is struck by its tone of exasperation and embarrassment, feelings tempered by the hope that perhaps games will grow into a form worthier of serious study. Towards the end of the book Atkins observes

> there is something truly radical here, something significantly novel, something that demands that we rethink the ways in which we view the artwork … until, that is, we boot the computer, insert the CD and confront the banality of what is currently realized within an intersection between text and technology that promises so much and delivers so little.
>
> (Ibid. 53)

Such statements are a reminder of another thing that ludologists and narratologists had in common: both were *embarrassed* by videogames' attempts at storytelling. For the former, stories were irrelevant anyway, an extraneous wrapper that stood in the way of a mature understanding of the videogame's true function and its significance as a cultural form; for the latter, meanwhile, there was something profoundly disappointing about the way that game designers 'remain[ed] fixed in narrative traditions', making clumsily conservative attempts to ape extant narrative forms when they could have been attempting a 'truly radical break with the ways in which we have previously told ourselves our stories' (ibid. 10). Since 2003, many fascinating and accomplished game-fictions have been released. Independent and avant-garde designers have experimented with more radical storytelling strategies, while with more experience, bigger budgets, more capable hardware and the help of professional actors and writers, triple A developers' attempts to ape and incorporate older narrative forms have become more assured. But if I am arguing for the validity (and indeed the importance) of studying games as fictions, it is not because the problem of reconciling gameplay and storytelling has suddenly been 'solved', nor because games' attempts at storytelling have stopped being awkward or embarrassing – far from it. In fact, the games I will be analysing succeed as accounts of identity and subjectivity precisely because, whether knowingly or inadvertently, they witness the tension between the modes of organizing and understanding experience familiar from traditional narrative forms, and those which are emerging in digital culture.

Here it is helpful to step back a bit. As we will see in the next chapter, scholars like Lash (2002) argue that narrative has long faced competition from information as our dominant form of 'cultural inscription' (130–137). Furthermore, while game studies is wont to frame the tussle between story- and system-oriented approaches as an in-house affair, the ludology/narratology debate is really a symptom of a much larger epistemological brouhaha. As I've already remarked, for thinkers like Alexander Galloway (2012), the post-Second World War era can be characterized by its embrace of a cybernetic 'black-box epistemology' informed by 'behaviourism, game theory, operations research', systems theory and information theory (241). As Galloway argues, this shift has had enormous implications for our understanding of 'critical inquiry', which has traditionally been seen as a matter of 'objects [being] unveiled or denaturalized to reveal their inner workings' – a description that holds true for Descartes, Kant, Marx, Freud and all their innumerable followers (ibid. 241–242). Today, however, this methodology is under increasing threat from an 'approach to knowledge … that abdicate[s] any requirement for penetration into the object in question, preferring instead to keep the object opaque and to make all judgements based on the object's observable comportment' (ibid. 242). In short, while game studies was busy arguing about the validity of applying techniques from literary theory, cultural studies, critical theory, philosophy and film studies to videogames, others were questioning the validity of hermeneutics and qualitative analysis *tout court*.

Inevitably, these ideas have begun to shape vernacular understandings of the self. But if behaviourism, neuroscience and evolutionary biology have become readier-to-hand as means of accounting for our actions and experiences, and if one index of the success of neoliberalism is the way that all aspects of life can now be understood in terms of the entrepreneurial individual's struggle to realize her potential, this does not mean that humanist philosophy, cod-Freudian pop psychology, Romantic individualism and eugenicist pseudo-science have entirely lost their purchase as frameworks for understanding selfhood and subjectivity, for better or worse. Thus, while Atkins' (2003) complaint that videogames have 'not made the same kind of radical departure from nineteenth-century realism' that other artforms have remains true (144), I would argue that the way that games cling to obsolescent and outmoded models of subjecthood and storytelling even as they incarnate the logic of technoculture makes them more, not less rewarding as objects of study. This book holds that there is still value in close contextual analyses of individual videogames, the expressive strategies they employ and the aesthetic effects they produce. It also acknowledges the shifts Galloway highlights, however. Drawing on game studies, and on work on literature, film and visual culture, it also engages closely with the work of scholars whose accounts of digital culture and new media represent attempts to develop forms of critical inquiry suited to the cybernetic culture in which games play an important role.

## Structure

Following this introductory chapter, the remainder of the book is divided into three sections, each consisting of two chapters. The first section concerns profiling and privacy. Chapter 2, Datafied Subjects, addresses three games about collective identity and security: in Sega's *Valkyria Chronicles*, we are the captain of a squad of soldiers defending their homeland from foreign invaders; in Lucas Pope's *Papers, Please*, we are a passport inspector in a fictional 1980s Eastern Bloc state; in Mitu Khandaker-Kokoris' *Redshirt,* we must escape an embattled space station by using social media to make powerful friends. Highlighting the differences between biographical narratives and data-based profiles as modes of expressing identity, these games show that videogames' often awkward attempts to reconcile storytelling with simulation need to be understood in the context of a cultural shift away from stories and towards information. Chapter 3, Private Subjects, considers two games about smartphone use and secrecy: the gothic mystery *Silent Hill: Shattered Memories* and Robert Yang's *Cobra Club*, a playful 'dick pic simulator' with a serious message about government surveillance. The games put forward very different understandings of privacy and subjectivity, understandings that can help us to unpack what is at stake in critical debates about online privacy.

The second section of the book looks at a range of games that use evocative figures – animals, robots, spectres, zombies and monsters – to allegorize the relationship between gamer and game, the embodied digital subject and their tech. Both chapters expand on the idea that 'the gamer' remains a cipher for fears of technologies duping or enslaving us. Chapter 4, Beastly Subjects, looks at games in which players are put in command of animal bodies, so that player, avatar and hardware become the poles of a 'cybernetic triangle' (Pettman 2011, 5). The action game *Tokyo Jungle* aims to create a seamless (or seamless-seeming) connection between the player and a range of agile zoo creatures; *Octodad* and its sequel use an intentionally unintuitive control scheme to foster a hands-on relationship with an octopus struggling to 'pass' as a human paterfamilias; Tom McHenry's interactive fiction *Horse Master* puts a human-animal relationship at the centre of a remorselessly bleak cyberpunk satire. All three pose questions about embodiment, immersion, identity, agency and control. Chapter 5, Synthetic Subjects, addresses the 'survival horror' genre. Where critics have traditionally turned to film theory and Freudian psychoanalysis to understand survival horror games' unsettling qualities, I take a different approach. Tracking the course of the genre from 2001's *Silent Hill 2* through the *Siren/Forbidden Siren* series to 2014's *Alien: Isolation*, the chapter argues that a key aspect of survival horror games is the way that they draw players into close relationship with networks of artificially intelligent nonplayer characters, using gothic tropes to mediate anxieties about our place in a culture of autonomous machines.

The final section of the book addresses the digital subject's experience of space and time. In Chapter 6, Mobile Subjects, space takes precedence. While gaming's history is often understood in terms of a progression from abstract two-dimensional mazes to photorealistic three-dimensional gameworlds, this misrepresents the variety of styles, techniques and representational traditions with which game designers engage – not to mention the range of subject positions that games accommodate. This chapter turns to *Killer 7*, *Fez* and *Pokémon GO* to offer a more nuanced account of how games frame space and orient players within it. Foregrounding the extent to which gaming has been shaped by a dialogue between Japan and North America, these games also show how rapidly and radically new media have transformed the digital subject's experience of space. Chapter 7, Productive Subjects, tackles questions of time. Drawing on the work of cultural theorist Lauren Berlant and feminist narratologist Robyn Warhol, it uses the networked shooter *Destiny* and the smash smartphone game *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* to show how modern videogames encourage players to understand and manage the flow of time, incorporating play into their everyday lives and cultivating gendered habits of feeling. The chapter concludes with two texts that articulate alternative understandings of gaming, habit, value and time: Porpentine's interactive fiction *Skulljhabit* and Dennis Cooper's novel *God Jr.*

It is impossible to do justice to the full range of experiences that now exist under the banner of 'videogames', and the selection of titles considered over the course of the next six chapters is no doubt skewed by both my preoccupations as a researcher and my preferences as a gamer. These caveats notwithstanding, the book covers a wide array of platforms, genres and modes of production, attending to the particular conjunctions of circumstances (technological, cultural, economic, etc.) from which particular games arise rather than attempting to account for 'videogames' in general. It looks at DIY, indie and triple A games, Japanese, European and American games, 'casual' and 'hardcore' games, multiplayer and singleplayer games, 2D and 3D games, free, 'free-to-play' and commercial games. The titles it addresses engage with a wide range of genres, aesthetic traditions and fictional forms, drawing on science fiction, high school drama, reality TV, cyberpunk anime, slasher cinema, *poliziotteschi* movies, gothic literature, sitcom and surrealism. They also incorporate or model social networks, photography apps, online message boards, digital marketplaces, profiling algorithms, targeted advertisements and artificial intelligence routines. Many address questions of digital subjectivity and identity directly, offering comparatively realistic portrayals of characters using digital devices and platforms. Others take a more roundabout approach. In both cases, they tend to be striking less for their smooth integration of these multiple influences and elements than for arresting anachronisms, jarring switches in register and bathetic juxtapositions that

witness gaming's status as a protean and promiscuous cultural field while also speaking to the tensions and contradictions at the heart of digital subjectivity.

## Notes

1 Essentially the industry's equivalent of Hollywood in terms of budgets, production values and orientation towards a mass audience.
2 That is, games with no upfront costs, funded via advertising or optional 'microtransactions'.

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