

Precarious Play: To Be or Not to Be Stanley

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Abstract

Modern game scholarship in the past two decades has known two dominant, yet paradoxical, tendencies in theorizing the subject of play: an interpellationary account and a deconstructivist one. Going from Miguel Sicart's concept of the ethical player as an initial compromise between the two, this article argues for an ideological subject of play that is a split subject. Aside from phenomenological presense through 'playing subjects,' as Foucaultian subjects constructed by the governing structure of rules, we must recognize the parallel subjectivity of 'played subjects,' inherent to – and narrativized by – the game as avatars, visual narrators or sheer content. In this constellation, the player appears to have a merely precarious position over the played, ready to lose control at the whim of the game.

Keywords

Digital Games; Ideology; Subjecthood; Stanley Parable; Interpellation; Deconstruction

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"I don't understand. How on earth are you making meaningful choices? What did you—*wait a second*. Did I just see, no that's not possible. I can't believe it. How had I not noticed it sooner? You're not Stanley. You're a real person!"

– Narrator (*The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Café, 2013)

When the narrator of *The Stanley Parable* realizes that the plot he was laboriously narrating was all this time acted out by a human player behind a computer, he is suitably astonished. After all, digital games may depend on an audience able to act – but that player's actions are still limited by script. Why, then, can it seem even remotely astonishing that *The Stanley Parable* reflects on this lack of freedom? I propose that this is because of a fundamental tension in participatory media that games often wilfully ignore: while the promise of interactivity may be a promise of freedom, even the briefest contemplation shows us that the explorable options making up this freedom are limited and, perhaps more disillusioning, pre-programmed. Yet, grammatically speaking, games *seem* to be particularly first-person experiences. *I* might take pride in completing a game, or gravely remember difficult moments of leading protagonists to victory. But who is that *I*, and to what extent can *I* be, at once, the person playing a game as well as embodying an avatar? How is this subject split across game and play and how do these subjectivities relate? In order to define the *I* of the digital game-playing subject, I ask:

What type of subject is constructed through the structures of digital game-play?

After a short introduction of my case study, providing a context and frame of reference for my research question, I will start by reiterating two traditions through which the gaming subject has frequently been theorized: an interpellationary and a deconstructivist model. Second, I will look at Miguel Sicart's attempt at bridging these two positions by describing a player-subject in a Foucaultian model of power relations that articulates how the game-as-structure brings into being a specific player-subject. I will, however, problematize Sicart's concept of the 'player-subject' as a unified, stable subject separate from the 'playing' self. My case study will serve partly as a counter-example, as *The Stanley Parable* thematizes reflection to address the difference between the playing subject and the avatar through which the player is present within the diegesis of the game. Finally, departing from Sicart's player-subject I will re-define the split subject of digital game-play on the basis of the phenomenological concept of 'presence,' which accounts for the continuum of difference between our natural selves and the embodiment

of avatars. The discussion involved, however, first requires the context of twenty years of game studies research.

Interpellation versus Deconstruction

Writing in 1995, media scholar Ted Friedman is early to recognize a tendency among critics to understand the limitations of choice in digital games as paradigmatic for ideology. Even in the case of freely explorable environments and branching choices, "a hypertext model of 'interactive cinema' still does little to give the player a sense of real autonomy," indeed "the choices remain a limited set of pre-defined options" (1995, p. 79). The problem is not so much that we should expect games to be 'objective' or 'free from bias' as Friedman puts it – after all, "computer programs, like all texts, will always be ideological constructions" (p. 81). The fear of those other critics is rather that the illusion of freedom promised by interactivity serves to veil the ideology of the program.

While Friedman cites columnist Jerry Pournelle, many other authors have followed comparable lines of reasoning. Media scholar Eggo Müller exemplifies this reasoning – while not, eventually, endorsing it – by summarizing it as such:

...whereas the 'passive' viewer has the freedom to negotiate or resist the ideology of a program (as described in active audience theory), the interactive participant necessarily affirms the program's ideological stance. (Müller, 2009, p. 53)

By going along with the proposed behaviour of the system, by following the rules of the game, the naive player-subject necessarily follows the system's proposed world view, or so the argument goes. Marxist academics Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter go so far as to say that interactivity "[rather] 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).

We may recognize, in this line of reasoning, a presumed merger of the player and the diegetic character into a single, stable subject. Completely caught up in the illusion of agency, players lose themselves in the game-proposed roles as "consumer, commander, commanded, cyborg, criminal" and other such "subject positions" (ibid.). The process of this identification is theorized by Dyer-Witheford through Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's process of interpellation, a calling (or hailing) into being of subjectivities through social practices. Any individual or collective idea of who we are is, according to Althusser's theoretical framework, a consequence of adopting, through material practice (Althusser 1969, p. 696) – in this case playing a digital game – "the subject position proposed for us by [societal] discourse" (Fiske, 1987, p. 53).

The reasoning is certainly appealing, but it is problematized by various factors. First – as mentioned above – it assumes a ‘naive’ player that is completely caught up in the illusion of the fictional role. In other words, the presumed merger of player and character disregards a cynical engagement with the game: aware of the propagandist agenda behind recruitment game *America’s Army*, I am perfectly able to play for fun without being truly hailed as (American) soldier. Second, the type of “feedback loop between user and computer” that Friedman also recognized (1995, p. 73) is problematized by what media scholar Diane Carr recognizes as the dynamicity of digital games:

...if interpellation does happen during play, there is no reason to assume that the potential interpellations posed by these various systems would be cumulative. It seems just as likely that they might clash, or that they would be mutually affirming one moment but contradictory the next. For this reason an account of ideology in games that relied on a static model of interpellation would be unsatisfactory. (Carr, 2007)

Similarly, Carr suggests the subject position offered to the player-subject to be dynamic, “activated or dormant, taken up, dropped or ignored by a player from moment to moment,” a position that fundamentally clashes with Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter’s assumption of the stable, ready-made roles that digital games offer for us to adopt.

We encounter a final problem to an interpellational model of digital play when returning to Friedman, who suggests that “the process of computer game playing” is exactly a revealing of “the inner relationships” of the simulation (1995, p. 82). In other words, “learning and winning [...] a computer game is a process of demystification: one succeeds by discovering how the software is put together” (ibid.). We find this school of thought continued in the work of psychologist Sherry Turkle (acknowledging the possibility for “simulation understanding,” or, alternatively, “resignation” to and “rejection” of its underlying assumptions [1996, p. 71]); Ian Bogost (coining ‘procedural literacy’ as a similar process of recognizing the rhetorical gestures of simulations’ processes [2007, p. 258]); and, notably, play scholar Joost Raessens, who aligns Friedman’s demystification and similar processes of recognizing digital games’ assumptions with Jacques Derrida’s method of *déconstruction*:

...the method of interpretation that aims to bring to the foreground those elements that operate under the surface, but break through cracks in the text to disrupt its superficial functioning. (Raessens, 2005, p. 376)

While, on one hand, then, an interpellational model of gameplay assumes that players are ‘hailed’ completely into the subject position offered by immersive games; a deconstructivist model proposes that

players are wholly detached critics that deconstruct games' systems as a quintessential way of engaging with and understanding them. As with every simplification of academic debate, these positions are necessarily exaggerated, but I take them to be representative of two wholly alternative ways of theorizing the player-subject that make far-reaching assumptions about the distinction between players and the fictional worlds they interact with.

Games as Power Structures

The point of friction between these two models is their choice of emphasis. An interpellational model, as seen above, assumes the ideological-paradigmatic role of an ideal player, subsumed under the game as a ludic structure, and emphasizes this governing structure as one guiding the player uncritically through a finite number of pre-programmed choices. The deconstructivist model emphasizes, instead, a detached player-subject acting as a type of Derridean reader,¹ i.e. unearthing the game's underlying rules as an object of analysis in order to interact with those rules (i.e. to play) successfully.

Rather than being mutually exclusive, the ideological-paradigmatic game-as-structure and the deconstructing player-as-subject are in a dialectical relationship, producing what Miguel Sicart terms the 'player-subject' within the game. Sicart argues that it is the relation *between* game and player that produces the player-subject. Although Sicart's interest lies mainly in articulating an *ethical* rather than an ideological player-subject, the way in which he does so is productive to answering my question. Sicart connects the game-as-object – as set of rules – to the player-subject by viewing the former as a power structure in a Foucaultian sense. Much like the way in which power structures are prerequisites for the subject, he argues, "the game as an object is a prerequisite for the being of the player" (2009, p. 67).

Sicart's player-subject is characterized by three properties which I will treat below, the last two of which I will problematize. First, as mentioned, Sicart's player-subject is produced in a process of voluntary subjectivization akin to Foucaultian power structures. This theoretical framework addresses the relationship between the game-as-structure and the player-subject, as well as providing a productive way of thinking the phenomenology of digital play as adopting and experiencing a temporary subjectivity. A second property of Sicart's player-subject is its status as a 'skin-subject,' whose relationship is unclear to other subjectivities – specifically to subjecthood outside of the game. This is related to the third property of Sicart's player-subject, which is its prerequisite of 'immersion,' a problematic term in the field of game studies that Sicart does not directly define.

¹ After Jacques Derrida, on whose method of *déconstruction* (cf. Derrida, 1967) Joost Raessens bases the term for his deconstructing player, as indicated above.

"Playing a computer game," for Sicart, "is an act of subjectivization, a process that creates a subject connected to the rules of the game" (p. 63). He uses the term subject in both Michel Foucault's meanings of the word: as "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (Foucault, 2001, p. 331). How does this subjectivization process work in the context of digital games?

Once a player figures out the rules of a game, they know what their "actions in the game were supposed to be," allowing them to act on that knowledge (Sicart, 2009, p. 65). That is: playing involves acknowledging and obeying its rules. Sicart consequently argues "that when a player is immersed in this system, her behaviour is shaped by the game system, its rules and mechanics" (p. 66). Inferred knowledge on that system produces the power relation that generates the subject's behaviour. This approach differs from the interpellational model above only in that the relation of the diegetic player-subject (while still undifferentiated from the played character) to the player as "a cultural and moral being" outside of the game is *voluntary* (p. 63). Player-subjects arise as conceptual test-cases: possibilities for players to perform other subjectivities.

Two reasons why Sicart uses Foucault in order to provide a framework to describe the relation between the player and the game are, first, that power and power structures for Foucault are not necessarily subject to negative or positive value statements, they merely exist; and, second, that "power structures are prerequisites for the subject" (p. 67). For Foucault, power structures are enacted not so much in "such-or-such institution of power, or group, or elite, or class:" it is rather a technique or form (2001, p. 331). This "form of power [...] categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity," making the individual into a subject (ibid.).

In "the Subject and Power," Foucault foregrounds the question of 'how' power is exercised in order to de-emphasize "questions of 'what' and 'why'" (p. 337). Power "brings into play relations between individuals," and it is in these power *relations* ("and not power itself" [p. 339]) that subjects are acted upon. Instead of "global, massive or diffused" power as entity, it is something exercised (put into action) on another: a power relation can only be articulated on the basis of an 'other' "recognized and maintained to the very end as a subject who acts" (p. 340).

In the case of a player maintained as a subject capable of action within the set of rules offered up by the game, that power relation rests on the instrument of consent. On the basis of this instrumental role of consent, Sicart argues for the necessity of recognizing the voluntary nature of player-subjectivity – indeed, "the exercise of power can never do without [violence or consent], often both at the same time" (Foucault, 2001, pp. 340-41). I would like to additionally draw attention to

Foucault's use of the words 'conduct' (playing on (*se*) *conduire*, to lead/drive; as well as to conduct oneself, to behave) and 'government,' in the way that a political structure can govern as well as in the way "in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed" (p. 341). A way to envision how games can function as rulesets generative of subjects is by thinking of them as governing or conducting those player-subjects, which "is to structure the possible field of action of others" (*ibid.*). Rather than violence (which I consider irrelevant to most cases of digital play) or voluntary contracts (which Sicart takes as defining in the case of digital play [2009, p. 68]), it is government that Foucault considers "the relationship proper to power" (Foucault, 2001, p. 341).

As a type of freely adopted governing institution, then, the power structure of a game's rules 'produces' a player-subject: "the game's ontological nature initially defines the ontological position of its subjects, the players, [in that it] establishes the starting point for the process of subjectivization that takes place in the act of playing a game" (p. 68). The 'ontological nature' of a game is, for Sicart "as a system of rules that create and are experienced through game worlds" (p. 47). Yet how does a system of rules produce a subject and define its initial ontological position?

Sicart approaches games as events akin to Badiou's *événement*: "an act of absolute truth that shatters the established knowledge" and, additionally, "an experience of delimited boundaries with a series of imperatives that have to be assumed in order to become a subject" (Sicart, 2009, p. 71). Thus, "faithful to those principles [the series of imperatives], the player as subject is created" (*ibid.*). To Sicart, this eclectic combination of Badiou and Foucault shapes a player-subject that is necessarily faithful to the game's experience. As such, "games as objects can condition what the ethical practices and values of the players will be through their affordances and constraints" (p. 102).

There are some problems with this process. The player-subject for Sicart is generated in a power structure, created as "a subset of our being as multiple subject" (p. 73). But this subjecthood, particular to each game, assumes a faithfulness to the governing principles in order to *be*. It ends when the player stops playing or does not abide to the principles of play – in Sicart's terms, when it does not show fidelity to the game's "affordances and constraints" (p. 102). In fact, "not being faithful to the rules implies not being faithful to the event, and therefore losing the ontological status of subject" for Sicart (p. 71). In his example, to stop playing a game like *Custer's Revenge* (Mystique, 1982), which features rape as its primary goal, is to "immediately suspend the player-subjectivity" and revert to one's "own personal and cultural values" (p. 103, *emphasis added*). The example is one that rejects a moral perversion: the player-subject, which we might remember as a subset of "our being as multiple subject" (p. 73), is rejected by "[the] cultural and

moral being" (p. 63) of which it is a subset. There is, for Sicart, an implicit super-subject: one's 'own' subject as an autonomous individual playing the game – made up of a set of personal and cultural values – that is, to Sicart, outside of the push and pull of power relations.

Granted, there is a certain porosity between Sicart's player-subject, generated by the power structure of the game, and the cultural and moral being of which it is a subset, but it is a one-way exchange. The subject that is playing the game informs the player-subject, in order to better "deduce the rules" of the structure players are subjects of (p. 69). Elsewhere, Sicart redefines the "larger cultural being" of which the "player-subject is only a subset" as an agent "bringing [experience] into the game" (p. 77). Their relation is further ill-defined: the player-subject is merely a "skin-subject in contact with the world outside the game, which in return does have influence over how a player experiences a certain game" (p. 102).

Sicart uses the metaphor of the skin for the player-subject as a temporarily adopted virtual skin "that is both 'oneself' and 'other,' because it has a component of strangeness that puts the player in contact with the virtual world" (p. 78). As such, playing becomes "putting on the player-skin and experiencing the world and the game world within it" (p. 79). The metaphor of the skin "connects the internal, individual subjectivity of the player with the larger communitarian, cultural and historical subjectivities of the contemporary self" (ibid.).

Furthermore, Sicart's player-subject depends on the metaphor of immersion: only "when a player is immersed in this system, her behaviour is shaped by the game system" (p. 66); and it is "the fact that the player is immersed in a ludic experience that creates the play-subject" (p. 98). This metaphor was introduced by game scholar Janet Murray in 1997, "derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water" (p. 98). It has been a trope in game studies since, but the metaphor has 'run wild' in a sense, extending, among other things, to a "psychological immers[ion]" (ibid.) that finds echoes in later broad uses as a type of emotional investment (Gerrig, 1998), any cognitive appropriation of a mental challenge (Björk and Holopainen 2005), a "suspension of disbelief," a "cerebral kind of involvement with the game" or a "meditation-like state—the Tetris trance" (Adams, 2004).

It is at least confusing that Sicart does not define immersion, extending it even to involvement with the cultural community of players (2009, p. 102). Especially considering how central immersion is as a prerequisite for the player-subject, it is difficult to see how the subjectivity offered by a digital game can be formulated as a phenomenological being, as a double existence of the body 'immersed,' or "tak[ing] place in the world of experiences both passively and actively" (p. 78). Sicart draws from philosopher Barbara Becker's understanding of the body-subject as "simultaneously an external being that can be experienced and an

internal being that experiences other [...] somewhere between a material object and a pure consciousness" (Becker, 2000, p. 363). He translates this body-subject into the player-subject by claiming that it "present[s] some qualities of embodiment," but he does not argue which and why. Sicart names the "complex and highly detailed process of avatar creation" in some games a "symptom of this fact," but not until game scholar Teun Dubbelman's dissertation, *Narratives of Being There* (2013), is the phenomenological turn in player subjectivity adequately argued.

What Sicart leaves us with is a relation between the game-as-structure and the player-as-subject wherein the game's formal set of rules governs the behaviour and ontology of a 'player-subject' through a process similar to Foucault's power relations. That concept of the player-subject is, however, unclearly based on the experience of immersion, an experience that is furthermore ill-defined in its relation to the player as a subject outside of the game – sometimes as another "subset of our being as multiple subject" (p. 73), other times as a "larger cultural being," (p. 77).

Stanley Decides for Himself Now

I would like to introduce, here, the case study of subjecthood in *The Stanley Parable*, since it provides a valuable reflection on Sicart's player-subject. Calling itself a *Parable* already implies some didactic nature: indeed the original release in 2007 (Galactic Café) was frequently described by its designers as "an experimental narrative-driven first person game [...] an exploration of choice, freedom, storytelling and reality, all examined through the lens of what it means to play a video game" (Mod Db, 2011).² The game, then, perhaps more than wanting to entertain, serves a critical purpose.

The Stanley Parable thematically foregrounds governance: the character Stanley is introduced as someone guided by orders, pushing buttons in servitude, and the player is ostensibly expected to do the same. Stanley epitomizes the first sense of Foucault's subject as someone "subject to someone else by control and dependence" (2001, p. 331), following each order, experiencing dread when the power relationship is suspended. Whereas before, "Stanley relished every moment that the orders came in, as though he had been made exactly for this job," suddenly "something very peculiar happened. Something that would forever change Stanley" (Galactic Café, 2013):

'He had been at his desk for nearly an hour when he realized that not one single order had arrived on the monitor for him to follow.

² NB: Unless specifically mentioned, I shall be referring to the more recent and extensive release of *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café, 2013) rather than the first game with the same title (Galactic Café, 2007).

No-one had shown up to give him instructions [...] Something was very clearly wrong. Shocked, frozen solid, Stanley found himself unable to move for the longest time. But as he came to his wits and regained his senses, he got up from his desk and stepped out of his office.' (ibid.)

At this point, the fictional subject Stanley ends, and the disembodied representation of Stanley – seen as an other, represented in a there-and-then, the way we see actors in film – turns into an embodied presentation: players take Stanley's perspective and control him in the here-and-now. As those last words of narration are heard, we have little choice but to follow those orders ourselves – that is, to subject ourselves to the same power relationship with the narration (as an aspect of the game's design) that Stanley was in. When I say "we have little choice" that means we have some choices: we may choose to stand around in office 427 and possibly look around; we may choose to quit the game; or we may choose to follow the narration.

Quitting the game at this point, refusing to play, suspends the 'player-subject' of *The Stanley Parable*. Refusing what philosopher Bernard Suits calls the "lusory attitude," the playful attitude to submit to "games [as] rule-governed activities," means that "it is not possible to play a game" (1978, p. 35). Alternatively, the term ludic *contract* is employed as an agreement, similar to Suits' lusory attitude, "on the part of players that they will forgo some of their agency in order to experience an activity that they enjoy;" which is, according to game design scholar Charles J. Pratt, a case of "adopting an ideology more than a set of abstract rules" (2010). Pratt's example is that of *Bioshock* (2K Games, 2007), whose ludic contract Clint Hocking describes as "seek power and you will progress" (2007, p. 256). To refuse that ideology is to refuse the ludic contract, is not to play. In other words, not playing means refusing the 'initial ontological position' of the 'player-subject' for Sicart (2009, p. 69).

If we do allow the player-subject to be created by submitting to the rules of the game, *The Stanley Parable's* branching narrative forces us to acknowledge a difference between the 'skin' we are adopting (i.e. that of Stanley) and ourselves as controllers of that skin. This problematizes Sicart's skin-subject as entirely subsumed under the 'multiple subject' of the player: characters like Stanley have a determinate background story, a gender, a visual representation and so on. Even in a game such as the *Parable* where all the choices are made by a player who does not relinquish this control, there is a split between the character *played* and the subject *playing*. *The Stanley Parable* plays on this, for example when suggesting the player quit the game in order to save Stanley from dying in a large crushing machine; or when acknowledging, as cited in the introductory citation, that Stanley is someone fundamentally different from the player, "a real person" (2013). This rhetoric is underlined visually in one of the game's endings, possible after another ending has

been completed first. Reaching the area with the two doors again, the player will 'leave' Stanley both in terms of control and of perspective – leaving him ungoverned and motionless (**Figure**). As the credits roll, the narrator worries about Stanley's inability to act, unable to decide for himself.



Figure 1. Third person (*The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Café, 2013)

Subjects of Presence

Leaving Stanley behind, as a skin or avatar previously inhabited, stresses the changeable nature of players' presence in games. In order to address this presence, I turn from Sicart to Dubbelman, doing so for two reasons. First of all, I turn to Dubbelman's concept of presence because it allows me to theorize more elaborately how different configurations of (dis)embodied presence connect what Sicart called the diegetic player-subject to the 'every-day' experience of the *playing* subject outside of the game. In other words, through presence I am able to describe the distinction between digital games' 'Stanley' and myself as a player behind the keyboard. A second reason is that a clear definition of presence replaces the overdetermined term 'immersion' as a way for "media users to feel physically present in the stories and fictional worlds expressed" (2013, p. 227).

I will start out by defining presence as a crucial term necessary to describe the connection between a playing subject and the game. After that, I will argue that the concept of presence sheds light on the difference between player and character as a variable identification that differs across genres and moments of play. To do this, I shall trace how presence accounts for the continuum of difference between our natural 'selves' and our avatars; second, I shall look at ways in which formal game design elements may affect this difference between the two.

Presence is “the feeling or fact of being present to something” (p. 2). *Mediated* presence is of course in need of some elaboration. An intuitive, but admittedly narrow, example of mediated presence would be that of virtual reality environments: consider the stereoscopic virtual reality headset *Oculus Rift*, currently in development, which early testers report grants “spatial perception – the fact that you are in a space where there is depth” (EDGE, 2014, p. 73). Such a narrow idea of presence is based on what Dubbelman calls a ‘logic of mimesis:’ “the idea that spatial presence in essence derives from the illusion of non-mediation,” (p. 25). Dubbelman’s phenomenological – rather than mimetic – approach to presence allows a recognition of mediated presence that deviates from natural perception (p. 27). Phenomenological media theory ‘externalizes perception,’ by stating that “our perceptual mechanism does not reside in the [embodied mind] but somewhere in-between our [embodied mind] and our environment” (p. 33). Central is the concept of intentionality, making perceived phenomena (including the perception of mediated presence) “a shared construct of our perceptual faculties and an object towards which our perceptual faculties are intentionally directed,” regardless of whether that object is ‘real’ or imaginary; everyday or unmediated (ibid.). Hence, media expand natural perception by my directing attention to it in order to perceive, leading media psychologists Wijnand IJsselsteijn and Giuseppe Riva to remark that, “as a user experience, the feeling of ‘being there,’ or presence, is not intrinsically bound to any specific technology—it is a product of the mind” (2003, p. 5).

Rather than *degrees* of presence – more or less resembling the ‘natural’ perception of everyday life – this phenomenological approach leads Dubbelman to formulate unhierarchized different *forms* of presence, in that “Media stimulate and enhance our bodily senses in particular ways [making] us see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and position in ways impossible without the intervention of these media” (Dubbelman, 2013, p. 47). As a consequence,

‘...it becomes ‘natural’ to us to temporarily engage the perceived world in another manner. In short, media produce [...] different ways of perceiving the world around us and our own position in it: other ways of being-in-the-world, to use phenomenological terminology.’ (ibid.)

An example that, for me, underlines the delimiting nature of perception as a ‘being-in-the-world’ is Deleuze’s description of the perceptual world of ticks. In Parnet’s interviews *L’Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* he relates an impression of the perceptual world of ticks: from a forest full of life it extracts only simple sensations of light, smell and touch that shape its world (1996) – would a simulation of a tick’s life not be perfectly suitable as a digital game experience? A tick climbs the tree, waits for

the light to change, smells the victim, drops, feels the victim, latches onto it. Mission complete.³

The reason I find Dubbelman's use of the phenomenological concept of mediated presence furthermore preferable to definitions of immersion in the case of digital games is because it bypasses the binary difference between immersion and distantiation that is so necessary to uphold a difference between purely interpellational and deconstructivist models of gameplay. One can be absolutely convinced of the fictional world yet not be present; just as one can be present in the game but distantiated from its events. For example, one can be immersed in Tolkien's Middle Earth, but nonetheless lack presence while reading *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954); just as one may feel distantiated from the goings on in *SimCity* (1989), yet be variably present – relating, acting and overseeing – in the world as disembodied mayor, city planner, real estate developer and so on. Secondly, I prefer the use of presence, in this case, because of its specific phenomenological account of digital play: the ability of digital games to render players experientially present, "anchored to one location in space and time" (p. 227). Whereas a cinematic or literary world is *witnessed*, digital games allow players to *experience* a fictional world as part of it. Using a theatrical analogy, digital games grant us the unique ability not just to be on stage, but to wander around the scenery and freely interact with its actors.

Importantly, Dubbelman distinguishes between embodied and disembodied presence: where the former is 'prosthetic' as if it were an artificial extension of the body, the latter gives players control over an external body of an 'other' (p. 126). Hence the difference between an avatar as "an external object to look at" versus "an embodied position to look from" (p. 103) – the 'skin' as object and the 'skin-subject' playing, respectively. An intuitive example is that of camera use, where "the first-person camera allows the player to think of the avatar as 'me,'" as opposed to the third-person camera's 'him' or 'her' (p. 99). I may think of playing, again, *America's Army*, in terms of myself enacting the role of American soldier, whereas the experience of playing *Spec Ops: the Line* or *The Stanley Parable* entails controlling Capt. Martin Walker or Stanley: the third person camera establishes Stanley as an 'other'. As I will argue below, game design elements (such as camera placement or an elaborate backstory for the avatar you are controlling) may create a certain disidentification – or, in terms of presence, a reduction of the impression that players *themselves* are physically present in the fictional world as 'player-subject'.

³ A similar game concept has been released under the name Mister Mosquito for PlayStation 2 (ZOOM Inc., 2002), in which the player flies around the room as a mosquito, keeping track of the amount of blood sucked from its victim and its amount of stress. Arguably, the player's perception is limited to those senses: sight, blood level and stress level.

The avatar, then, has a “double status” as both prosthetic point-of-view and external controlled object, allowing it to either “mimic [or] defer from ‘natural’ embodiment,” (p. 103) similar to Becker’s body-subject. But this closeness *or* distance to everyday experience and personhood is variable and, for Dubbelman and those scholars his research is based on, furthermore a matter of design. What this adds, first and foremost, onto ontological claims of what games are (as power structures) or how players become subjects through them (by accepting games’ affordances and constraints) is a terminology by which to indicate those formal properties of games by which the player ‘acts’ the character. Furthermore, it indicates a spectrum of identification that brings further into focus the continuum of difference between the interpreting subject outside of the game, the playing subject controlling the avatar and the played avatar represented:

‘Computer games design the relationship between the player [and the] avatar in various ways. At one end of the spectrum, we find the subjective avatar of embodied presence (i.e. the avatar as anchored location to look from), while at the other end, we find the objective avatar of disembodied presence (i.e. the avatar as external object to look at).’ (Dubbelman, 2013, p. 104)

Besides a critical reworking of phenomenological Presence Theory for participatory media, Dubbelman does a thorough job of addressing some of the different game design configurations that may produce and affect presence. For instance, a ‘dual-locus’ configuration splits the played subject across two [*duo*] places [*loci*]. One of these played subjects being an objective avatar (such as Stanley) that is controlled in order to navigate the world and interact with other objects and characters. Another being the visual-perceptual subject-position through which the player beholds (from a disembodied position hovering freely around) their avatar as a played (in the sense of ‘controlled’) object in the world (pp. 110-13).

This specific configuration is elucidative as it lies between the poles of first-person and third-person configurations. Straightforwardly embodied first-person configuration entails a full correspondence between the place and orientation of the player with that of the character as in natural perception, as in first-person games such as *The Stanley Parable* or *America’s Army*. Conversely, in the entirely disconnected third-person configuration, players’ orientation and place are fully segregated and the player lacks control over one or both of these, as in the case of any cut-scenes,⁴ quick-time events,⁵ or, more concretely, *Heavy Rain’s*

⁴ Cut-scene is a term frequently used to describe the film-like interruptions of game-play that serve as exposition without allowing the player’s input. In Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska’s words, cut-scenes are short “audiovisual sequences in which the player usually performs the role of more *detached observer* than is the case in the more active

independent ('cinematic') camera (Quantic Dream 2010). It is perhaps confusing, but important to note, that Dubbelman's use of 'third-person configuration' is distinct from 'third-person camera' (2013, p. 125). He categorizes as 'semi-first person' or 'dual-locus' what might colloquially be named third person play – e.g. in the phrase "Tomb Raider is a first-person shooter" (Schleiner 2001, p. 222) – whereas Dubbelman's category of 'third-person configuration' denotes a "player's subjective point-of-view [entirely] detached from the objective avatar's body" (cf. Dubbelman 2013, p. 118).

The dual-locus configuration is additionally interesting because it presents a shared control over what is traditionally a mode of story-telling: the "visual narrator" of cinema (Verstraten, 2006, pp. 16-17). The visual narrator is an organizing instance that expresses itself through camera shots as external focalizer or, when it aligns itself with an intradiegetic character, as an internal focalizer. A dual-locus configuration puts this task of controlling the camera and indeed of focalization fully in the hands of the player. Still, it is valuable to recognize the camera as apart from the avatar despite the player's control over both.

First of all, we must recognize a difference between the two across configurations. A clear example of this is the game *Resident Evil 3: Nemesis* (Capcom, 1999), a survival horror game where the player controls Special Tactics And Rescue Service (STARS) member Jill Valentine, heavily outnumbered by zombies in fictional Raccoon City. While the game grants the player disembodied presence as the avatar Jill, its static camera angles act as a classical visual narrator. While players lead their avatar through the city, the visual narrator adopts a fixed camera perspective in a pre-determined corner of each room, lurking at the player or slowly following them with its gaze. By contrast, opening doors causes a temporary shift in visual narration to a point-of-view shot aligned with the focalizer – what Dubbelman calls an embodied "first-person avatariation configuration" (2013, p. 104).

Second of all, games may variably give or take control over each separately in certain situations. *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (Naughty Dog, 2007) is a good example of this. Navigating Nathan Drake through the Amazon jungle, the camera usually acts as a cinematic visual narrator: it points in a direction that progresses the narrative, indicating important objects and so on. Whilst action-packed scenes that demand 360 degrees of attention – ambushes, for example – grant the player

periods of gameplay. Many games use cut-scenes to establish the initial setting and background storyline" (2002, p. 11).

⁵ A quick-time event is similar to a cut-scene, but one with "a prompt [to push a button displayed on-screen] that forces the player to make a split-second action or suffer usually painful or fatal consequences" (Rogers, 2010, p. 183).

full control over the camera in a dual-locus configuration; cinematic cut-scenes introduce a more autonomous visual narrator – employing cuts, reverse shots and other filmic techniques. More importantly, these same cut scenes show a similar precariousness of the player’s control over the avatar: while control over the camera is often relinquished, cut-scenes also temporarily take away the player’s control over the avatar.

The dual-locus configuration is critically relevant because it establishes a clearly variable (dis)embodiedness: although the played subject is present as both camera and avatar, one constantly plays through a spatial distance to, and difference with, the external avatar. As such, the avatar opens up the possibility of gaining its own identity. For this reason the dual-locus configuration is dominant in such games such as *Tomb Raider* (Eidos, 1996), *Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune* and *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar San Diego, 2010). Each of these examples leaves a clearly identifiable and unambiguous distinction between the avatar as a strong narrative character and the player as their ‘puppet-master’. Hence, I accept *Tomb Raider*’s Lara Croft to have a background story; *Uncharted*’s Nathan Drake to take decisions in cinematic interludes that I would not take myself; and even for *Red Dead*’s John Marston to die – for him to be replaced by his son as successive avatar.

The point, of course, is that there lies a possibility of disidentification in the distinction that some games create between the player (as playing actor and interpreting audience) and the avatar (as the in-game representation of the played character). A game that would stay consistently within a first-person configuration (thereby never revoking my agency) cannot principally have me do things against my will. However, most other configurations will break my absolute embodied presence at some point. How may we understand that distinction between player and character?

Based on the above, we may conclude that this distinction is above all variable and that it is in part dependent on the production of presence through formal properties of the game: i.e. coded rules pertaining to the player’s influence on point-of-view and control of the avatar. As such, a point-of-view and means to navigate the avatar that coincide more with each other and are more akin to ‘natural’ (i.e. everyday) bodily perception leave a *minimum* of difference between the player (as playing actor and interpreting audience) and the avatar (as the in-game representation of the played character). Conversely, a disconnect between point-of-view and navigational means lead to a greater distinction between the player and character.

We may add that this co-incidence of player and avatar affects identification, provided that we follow Dubbelman’s phenomenological argument that perception and physical position are determined by the inclination and affordance to act inherent to the environment (pp. 100-101). As such, when we relinquish our possibility to act (as in cinematic

interruptions) or see our intentions represented by the actions of an other (as in the dual-locus configuration) our presence gives way to that of another that is not us. The greater this distinction is between player and character, the less we align with the representation, goals and actions of the 'skin' we control.

Concisely, then, the continuum of difference between player and character is characterized by a wide scale of formal properties that varyingly identifies the player with or differentiates them from their in-game representation. Both the interpellational model as well as Sicart's concept of the player-subject do not account for this difference.

Conclusion: the Subject of Play

It is useful, at this point, to return to my research question regarding the type of ideological subject constructed through game-play. It is problematic to regard this subject through either an interpellational model focusing on a playing subject identified entirely with a played subject; or a deconstructivist model focusing on an interpreting subject interacting with the game as object (or the 'subject matter' of the interpreted subject). Rather, Miguel Sicart breaks open these mutually exclusive lines of reasoning by proposing a player-subject that is created by the game as a 'skin-subject,' adopting the avatar of the game as a skin in order to perceive the game, in which this player-subject acts according to the power structure of the game's rules. This player-subject has an ambiguously defined relation to the player outside of the game, of which it is either a subset among multiple subjectivities, or the temporary subset of one greater moral being. Additionally, Sicart's skin-subject ignores the represented identity of many avatarial 'skins,' focusing instead on the process of avatar creation in some games as a symptom of the skin-subject's embodiment.

Teun Dubbelman's concept of mediated presence allows a theory of the relations between the character, the intra- and extradiegetic player. Phenomenologically, Dubbelman takes mediated ludic presence as another type of perception, delimited by the senses offered by the mediatized expression. This presence is furthermore subject to different configurations: embodied as if looking through different eyes; or disembodied, present as camera *and* avatar, looking down as we navigate. The subject of play is thus one that is essentially 'split' across the process of game-play. Players are afforded control over this process by being granted presence. At the same time, this control is both precarious and constrained. Within a limited configuration of presence, control over avatar and camera may be relinquished to a (cinematic) narrator. The specific configurations and presented content of *The Stanley Parable* comment on that split between the player as an audience; the player as an actor; and the player as precarious character. The player, thus, is a subject not securely held, equally

subject to narration as to its own free autonomy. At once Stanley, and controlling Stanley: that is the answer.

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