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DISSERTATION

EMBODIED POLITICS: AVATARS IN 3D VIDEO GAMES AS IDEOLOGICAL INTERFACES

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I wrote this dissertation by myself, referencing all the resources used. The dissertation was not used in another study programme or to obtain the same degree.

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Embodied Politics: Avatars in 3D Video Games as Ideological Interfaces

Anotace

Zástupná těla, tedy avataři a avatarky, se stala jednou z hlavních forem naší mediální interakce – od sociálních médií po videoherní světy. Na první pohled by se mohlo zdát, že jsou prostě jen nástroji, které v digitální sféře vykonávají naši vůli. Ale co když se, pokaždé, co se převtělíme do avatarovy kůže, vystavujeme silám, jež formují to, jak se vztahujeme k vlastnímu já? A co když nám avatarka na obrazovce ve skutečnosti nikdy nepatřila?

Cílem teoretické dizertační práce je propojit kritiku ideologie přítomné ve videohrách s konceptem avatarství. Dvě hloubkové případové studie vybraných her, v nichž hraje avatar (pro potřeby práce chápaný jako hráčská, ovladatelná, trojrozměrná postava zasazená do herního prostředí) zásadní roli, postupně rozpracovává klíčové aspekty avatarství ve vztahu k ideologické kritice. V poslední kapitole jsou pak na kratších studiích subverzivních her naznačeny kritické možnosti videoherní tvorby.

První kapitola na základě existující literatury zkoumá otevřený svět videohry *Genshin Impact*, jehož systémy interpretuje prostřednictvím teorie ideologie Louise Althussera, čímž rozvíjí existující literaturu v oboru herních studií. Althusserův koncept interpelace propojuje s dosavadními poznatky týkajícími se konstituce hráčského subjektu ve vztahu k herní krajině, herní rytmičnosti a časovosti. Výslednou syntézu demonstruje na otevřeném světě *Genshin Impact*. Kritiku ideologie vetkané do základní struktury zabydlování herního světa tak zasazuje do kontextu nadmíru populární videohry s problematickým free-to-play byznysovým modelem. Jako prizma k chápání ideologické role avatara při konstituci hráčské subjektivity navrhuje koncept *avatar-as-interface* (avatar jako rozhraní).

Druhá kapitola ideologickou kritiku propojuje s teoriemi afektu, fenomenologie a herní spekulace. Existující literaturu z oboru herních studií i mimo něj aplikuje na případovou studii videohry *Armored Core VI*. Základní konstitutivní synestetické prvky videoherního zážitku (rytmus, váha, zvuk ad.) spojuje s poznatky z kapitoly první a dále tak rozvíjí model ideologicky podmíněného videoherního vtělení, jež vytváří

podmínky srozumitelnosti videoherního světa, do kterého hráčstvo vstupuje se svým avatarem. Navrhuje se na avatarství dívat jako na proces abstrakce těla, který má dopady na náš vztah s virtuálním dvojnictvem.

Poslední kapitola se věnuje možnostem ideologické kritiky vlastní videohernímu médiu, a to jak v nezávislé videoherní produkci, tak herním umění. Na příkladu třech kratších případových studií videoher mapuje a kriticky reflektuje schopnost daných titulů upozorňovat na ideologické efekty popsané v předchozích kapitolách.

Trojici kapitol doplňují dvě překlenující sekce, v nichž je dosavadní koncepce avatarství shrnuta a nabídnuty další perspektivy (zejména psychoanalýza).

Práce jako celek se dotýká vlivných titulů a různých videoherních žánrů (s jejich politicko-ekonomickými kontexty), na jejichž případových studiích rozvíjí model ideologické kritiky videoherního vtělení. Spolu s tím reflektuje a integruje stávající oborovou literaturu týkající se avatarství. Poslední kapitola pak poznatky zasazuje do kontextu jdoucího nad rámec oborové kritiky, s přesahy do umění nebo nezávislé, subverzivní tvorby. Práce tak představuje jak teoretickou intervenci do oboru herních studií, tak, doufám, může přispět k rozvoji kritického slovníku herní tvorby jako takové. Spolu s tím nabízí kritický pohled na způsoby, jimiž kybernetické systémy ovlivňují naše fyzická i virtuální těla a prozkoumává subverzivní potenciál videoher takové působení reflektovat.

Klíčová slova

avatar, ideologie, videohry, vtělení, interpelace, rozhraní, kybernetika

Prohlášení o použití umělé inteligence

Při vypracování této práce jsem použil nástroj Grammarly pro kontroly a opravy anglického pravopisu, výjimečně stylistickou asistenci. Veškeré změny jsem ručně zanášel a kontroloval, přičemž jsem nijak nevyužil funkce pro generování nového textu.

Abstract

Inhabiting a proxy body is an ubiquitous experience in contemporary culture. From social media to worlds of video games, the so-called avatars have become one of the dominant forms of our media interaction. A cursory look might see them merely as vessels through which we enact our will in the digital sphere. However, what if every time we jump into the avatar's skin, we let ourselves be influenced by forces that shape our very self-conception? And what if the avatar on screen is not really ours to begin with?

This theoretical dissertation aims to connect the critique of ideology present in video games with the concept of avatarhood. Two thorough case studies of selected games gradually work through key aspects of avatarhood in relation to the ideology critique. In this thesis, an avatar is understood as a player-controlled 3D character that inhabits a navigable virtual environment. The last chapter then outlines critical possibilities of video games to draw attention and subvert ideology using the means of the medium itself.

Drawing from the existing literature, the first chapter examines the open world of *Genshin Impact*. It interprets game systems through the lens of Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, expanding upon existing scholarship in the field of game studies. The chapter deals with Althusser's concept of interpellation. It connects interpellation with current findings about the constitution of the player subject in relation to the game landscape. The resulting synthesis is demonstrated using the open world of *Genshin Impact*, developing a critique of the ideology embedded within the basic structure of inhabiting the game world, taking into account game rhythmicity and temporality. It does so in the context of a very popular video game with a problematic free-to-play business model. It suggests the concept of *avatar-as-interface* to understand the role the avatar plays in constituting the player's subjectivity.

The second chapter connects ideological critique with the theory of affect, phenomenology, and video game speculation. It applies the existing theory to a case study of the video game *Armored Core VI*. It connects the constitutive synaesthetic elements of the video game experience (rhythm, sound design, the weight of game objects, etc.) with the findings of the previous chapter to further develop a model of ideologically dependent video game embodiment: an embodiment that creates the

conditions of intelligibility of the video game world that the player enters with their avatar. This chapter aims to understand avatarhood as a process of bodily abstraction, with effects on our relationships with virtual doubles.

The final chapter explores the possibilities of ideological critique inherent in the video game medium, both within the realm of independent video game production and in game art. Using three shorter case studies of video games as examples, it maps and critically reflects on the ability of the titles in question to draw attention to the ideological effects described in the previous chapters.

Two interstitial sections complement the three chapters. Those sum up the conception of avatarhood as discussed up to that point and offer additional perspectives (notably, psychoanalysis).

The thesis touches on influential titles of varying genres (with their political-economic contexts). It uses these case studies to develop a model of ideological critique of video game embodiment. It also reflects and integrates existing game studies scholarship related to avatarhood. The last chapter then situates this discussion in the context relevant beyond the disciplinary boundaries, overlapping with domains of contemporary art and independent, subversive practice. The thesis thus represents both a theoretical intervention in the field of game studies and, I hope, contributes to the development of a critical vocabulary for game creation. It also offers a critical perspective on the ways that cybernetic systems influence our physical and virtual bodies, and it explores the subversive potential of video games to reflect them.

Keywords
avatar, ideology, video games, embodiment, interpellation, interface, cybernetics

Statement regarding the use of artificial intelligence
When writing this thesis, I used Grammarly to check and fix any grammar errors. I also used it sparingly to assist with stylistics. All changes made were checked and manually implemented, without utilizing the generative text functionality.

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Introduction:
Be a (Virtual) Body



Fig. 1: My character in Elden Ring contemplates the horizon.

Elden Ring (FromSoftware, 2022) begins in a small, dimly lit room, perhaps a ruined church. I carefully maneuver the sticks on my gamepad to test how the character in the center of the screen moves. Moments ago, I created this wizard by tinkering with a character creator for ten minutes, unsure whether it should be somewhat like me or totally different. After the uncertain first steps, I try one more move: by pressing B, my astrologer rolls, breaking a piece of furniture in the process. I press Y, open the door, and step out, where a vista with a misty castle and a glimmering spectral tree on the horizon greets me. Will I be able to go there?

In a matter of moments, I moved from "my character opens the door" to "I open a door". Something interesting occurred during this shift, where what might appear as a mere tool to play the game—the avatar—is not bound to my selfhood.

Messages on the ground guide my movement. I jump off the cliff and cross a bridge, frightful it might break, sending visceral sensations to my physical body. I clutch my

gamepad even tighter. Then, the simulated virtual camera points towards a glimmering statue, and an enemy appears. After a few nervous exchanges, it kills me instantly.

It will be much later that I learn, and (within the fiction of the game) my avatar learns many fighting strategies I can use to defeat that enemy and obtain the precious runes it drops after its death. I can then spend them to upgrade my abilities further. To become a god of this forsaken world. But my wrist hurts, and I put the gamepad down. Later in bed, I am still thinking about the promises the open world of the game holds for me, my adventurer, and the 3D character we both embody.

Through the avatar, we act inside the gameworld, and our body gets disciplined by its rules. Avatar is a crucial part of the whole aesthetic experience of playing the game. It is an abstracted allegory of a human body as well as a technical object with an important role in the contemporary cultural landscape. One we encounter every day in many forms. This dissertation aims to probe the ideological contexts of this ubiquitous media form.

The concept of an avatar is a slippery one, enmeshed within at best ambiguous, at worst uneasy assumptions about immersion in virtual worlds[1], agential player freedom, and, as de Wildt et al. (2019) describe it, a part of what they call "technomysticism" within Silicon Valley counter-culture.

Avatars conjure up an image of technology as situated above the mundane, everyday life, and avatar, in many instances, being "messianic" (de WIldt et al., 2019) figure within the fiction of the game. Since the word avatar has etymological roots in Sanskrit (depicting a god's vessel in the physical realm), the use of avatar to describe some form of digital embodiment or proxy echoes dreams of transcendental technology—no surprise its western use was popularized by a sci-fi novel *Snow Crash*. (Stephenson, 2011, p. 33)

[1] I am indebted to the ongoing critical discussion within game studies regarding the colloquial usage of the term "immersion" to describe the feeling of being absorbed in a game experience. Apart from numerous discussions by Kunzelman & Lutz (2025), the key work problematizing immersion by pointing out many ways players are always aware of the mediality of being in a game, which informs important parts of this thesis, is Jørgensen's (2013) *Gameworld Interfaces*.

I am interested in avatars as ideological devices: I assume that they are both reflections of ideology/ideologies and, by interacting with them & controlling them, we come under the effect of such ideology.

To underscore the importance of avatars as a critical topic, we need not look far. On the one hand, the relatively recent metaverse discourse, infused with relentless Silicon Valley PR, has taken avatar and virtual embodiment as its selling point. (Ravenscraft, 2023) However, lacking is the promise of the metaverse, both in the unrealized promises of actual functionality or historical narrative (obfuscation of many precedents, especially in the form of multiplayer online video games[2] and spaces, to appear novel), it makes use of latent desires of humans to have some sort of digital puppet/proxy/body/persona. Yet, this dissertation is very much informed by the previous scholarship on avatarhood, which understands it not only as a tool, but as a device through which we assume a particular subjectivity (or subject position): "The avatar (…) is not mainly a vehicle of agency, but a vehicle of being exposed. (…) [T]he fictional aspect of being subject to the world of the game, of acutely belonging to it." (Klevjer 2022, p. 16) Notably, for Klevjer, avatars are one of the defining properties of video games at large: "The archetypical 'special issue' of computer game representation, in other words, is avatarial embodiment." (p. 69)

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, avatars are the main way the highest-grossing games across the globe generate their income: by selling virtual clothing items, avatar augmentations, and by crafting their worlds and surrounding social practices in a way that builds affective bonds with players to make money. (van Ryn et al., 2018) It is the case of *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017), *Roblox* (Roblox Corporation, 2006), *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2024), or gaming platforms/stores (like *Steam)* themselves, and many, many more cases. My critical inquiry into avatarhood is, to a large extent, informed by the role avatars play within the contemporary global video game market, or, what Witheford & Peuter (2009) call "a paradigmatic media of Empire—planetary, militarized hypercapitalism" (Witheford & Peuter, p. xv).

[2] From here on, I will use the term "video game" to refer to interactive digital cultural media, encompassing other common labels such as "computer game" or "digital game." Unless specifically stated, a shortened "game" will likewise stand in for "video game".

The Many Faces of Virtual Doubles

Already, a multitude of avatar aspects emerge: (1) the avatar as a double, (2) the avatar as an affective channel coupled with the avatar as a tool to play the game with, (3) the avatar as a social project embedded within online group dynamics, (4) the avatar as a site where "ludocapitalism" (Witheford & de Peuter, p. xiv) channels its power. As I will attempt to show, I understand all these outlooks on avatar to be parts of the complex avatarial interface, irreducible to one particular aspect. For example, in *Genshin Impact,* we (1) embody a cute anime heroes and heroines, (2) have a proxy body that acts within the world of the game and through which we make the world our own, (3) we collect avatars, discuss and showcase them online, (4) our avatar becomes the vehicle through which we make value for the game owners and our behaviour gets modulated in service of monetisation model.

This multifacetedness is reflected in the theoretical canon. While the present study is concerned with the concrete realization of the avatar in relation to its ideological effects, there are several conceptions of "avatars" and "avatarhood" being used throughout game studies discourse. Rune Klevjer (2023) offers a complex examination of several roles that the avatar as an object of interest plays in the theory of games: a tool through which we act in the rule-based system of the game (ludic), a self-presentation vehicle (social), a virtual body (corporeal), a narrative (mimetic), or an aesthetic device (reflective).

Given the multitude of different outlooks and interpretations of the term avatar, it is necessary to clarify some of my initial theoretical standpoints. The present study is not primarily concerned with *identification*, the mimetic relationship between the player and the character on screen. In the same vein, the emphasis is not put on the diegetic[3] relationship between the player-controlled character and other characters in the game. That does not mean these facets of *avatarhood* (Klevjer, 2023) are to be disregarded. Nevertheless, for the ideological critique, they obfuscate the overarching structure.

[3] I find Jørgensen's (2013, p. 66) argument that "[u]sing diegesis as a concept to cover the gameworld is misleading because it implies that the gameworld is designed according to the logic of narratives, an implication that obscures the actual functional characteristics of the gameworld" persuasive. Therefore, instead of diegesis, I'll be referring to the fiction of the game narrative and clarifying further where needed. This functional outlook on video games will be elaborated upon further in the following chapters.

Generally, my perspective aligns with that of Klejver's (2022) account of an avatar that could be understood as experiential (related to our very subjectivity)*:*

> The computer game avatar (…) exploits the digital computer's unique capacity for realistic simulation, and acts as a mediator of the player's embodied interaction with the gameworld. The relationship between the player and the avatar is a prosthetic relationship; through a process of learning and habituation, the avatar becomes an extension of the player's own body. Via the interface of screen, speakers, and controllers, the player incorporates the computer game avatar as second nature, and the avatar disciplines the player's body. (…) However, the computer game avatar is not to be understood as a tool or a mouse cursor; it gives the player a subject-position within a simulated environment, a vicarious body through which the player can act as an agent in a fictional world. This vicarious body is not merely a mediator of agency or 'interactivity' in a general sense, but belongs to and is exposed to its environment. In other words, an avatar is interesting and playable not just because of what it makes us able to do or perform, but because of what happens to us in the world that the avatar lets us inhabit. The avatar is the embodied manifestation of the player's engagement with the gameworld; it is the player incarnated. (Klevjer 2022, p. 22)

In other words, multiplicity of player-avatar relationship gradations is a part of the whole *avatar-as-interface* (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 130) complex.

The *avatar-as-interface* is a concept I lift out of Jørgensen's (2013, p. 3) inquiry into the "[gameworlds as] world representations designed with a particular gameplay in mind and characterized by game-system information that enables meaningful player interaction." When we understand the whole video game as an interface, "the avatar itself becomes a liminal feature that mediates between the player and the game." (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 128) In Jørgensen's view, "the avatar works as an interface system that provides the player with information about what in-game effects are affecting the avatar at any given moment."

The understanding of the avatar I want to put forward is similar, yet also different. As the following chapters will attempt to demonstrate, the interface system is always an

affective one. And it is through this affect we are led into a concrete subject position within the ideologically fraught gameworld. Avatar is thus a locus of the player's agential position as well as a site of affective and ideological effects.

By following Jørgensen (2013), I see the avatar as a synthetic concept that is at the heart of examined game experiences—it is an interface with the gameworld and its systems, an important site of player agency (Bódi, 2022, p. 16) that is constitutive of a certain subject position (Vella, 2016).

While the term 'avatar' is also used to describe any visual proxy for a user of an online space (discussion boards, social networks, etc.), I focus on the game, three-dimensional avatars, because they are increasingly important technical phenomena through which we interact with virtual worlds and economies. It is a choice both pragmatic and conceptual. Firstly, focusing only on 3D player avatars delimits the still arguably vast number of games that could be included in this text. However, more importantly—and it is an argument that will be elucidated throughout the thesis—this type of avatar is very distinct from the other forms of "proxy embodiment" (Klevjer 2012, p. 27) or "vicarious body" (Klevjer 2022, p. 101). The set of affordances[4] and framing devices gives rise to a different kind of subject position (Vella, 2016, p. 2) than, for example, first-person avatars or 2D avatars.

It is through the avatar in a navigable 3D environment that the world becomes intelligible to us in a distinct way: the way we are oriented in the 3D game world via our 3D avatar is different from the way avatar-less god-games (such as real-time strategies) or 2D games (platformers) orient us. Avatar is an important way we interface with the gameworld and through which the gameworld communicates with us.

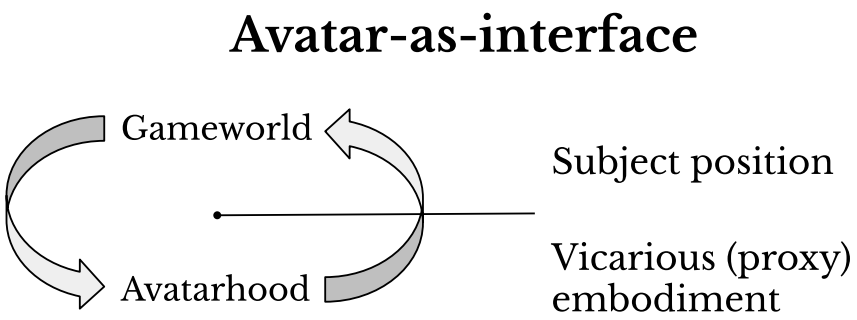
Therefore, following Daniel Vella's (2016) work on subjective positions within gameworlds and inhabiting virtual landscapes, the agency[5] produced by embodying

[4] "An object can afford some kinds of interaction by means of limiting others." (Bódi, 2022, p. 26)

[5] I draw from Bódi (2022, p. 30), who discussed agency in avatar-based games: "Player agency can be conceptualised as the possibility space for meaningful choice expressed via player action that translates into avatar action, afforded by a game's design." In this study, the agency serves only a supplementary role and is therefore not elaborated upon extensively. For all the different aspects of agency, including those related to time, space, and malleability

an avatar with its affordances is never simply a case of formal (procedural/operative) manipulation. There is a multitude of affects at play that together with the formal structure of the game world facilitate the whole interactive situation within which the avatar plays a crucial role as a vehicle, through which ideologies are channeled.

We can plot the interplay between avatar(hood) and gameworld in the following way:



Avatar, in this perspective, is primarily an interface through which the player is in two-way contact with ideologies making themselves actual through the interaction within the gameworld (and beyond). That means I am not especially interested in the ways ideology is represented by the game on the level of fiction—while there could be some interesting insights gained from analyzing for example pastoral, mythical, alchemy-infused world of *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo, 2023), I am interested in the ideology that takes hold while *interacting with the world* on the backdrop of said fiction.

To put it simply: Something interesting happens when players embody a 3D virtual body and allow themselves to be put under effect by many forces that either originate or end under the avatar's skin (if we can even conceptualize it as having any).

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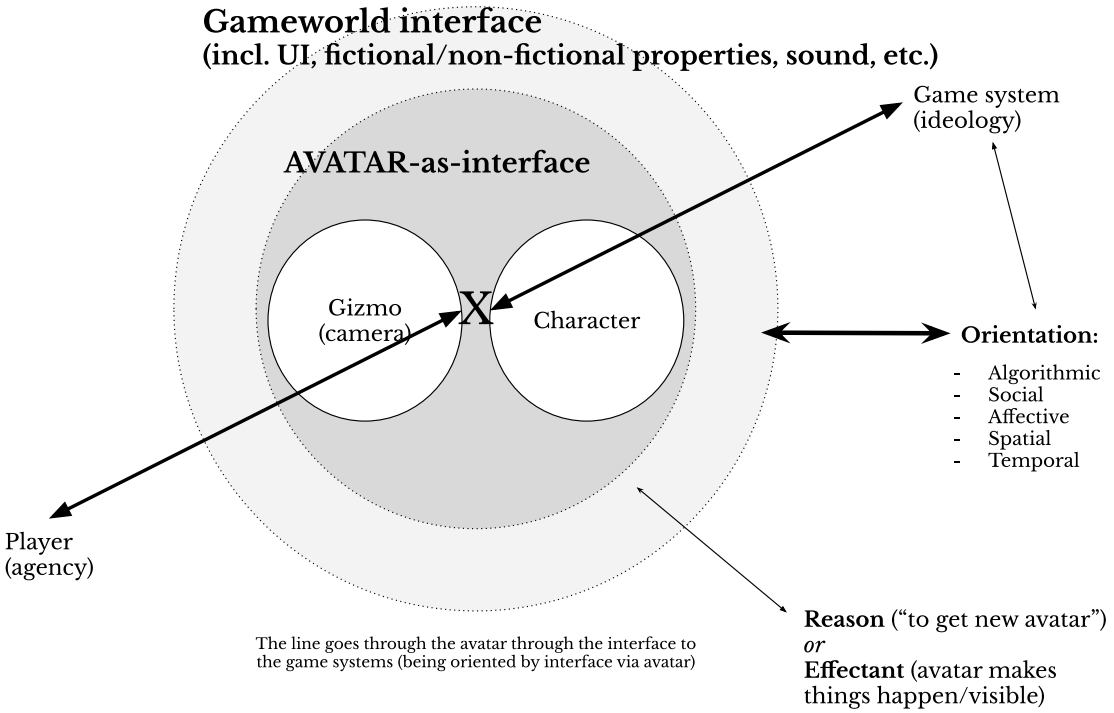
of the gameworld, Bódi (2022) provides an excellent material. Her agential framework distinguishes "between four dimensions in which player action can be realised, which, put simply, can be described as agency in space, in time, over customising the avatar and its surrounds, and as narratively meaningful action." (Bódi, 2022, p. 207)

The Specificity of 3D Avatars

We can imagine the situation, whereby the player accesses the game via the (3D) avatar as follows:



Avatar becomes the chief entry point through which we enact our player agency in the game world (and, therefore, we communicate with the ideology embedded within it): "'Avatar-based' singleplayer computer game (...) defines a particular kind of play, a game form, which is centred around avatarial embodiment as the primary mediator of interaction with the game space." (Klevjer 2022, p. 23)

Following Jørgensen (2013), I view the avatar as part of the gameworld interface. Alongside UI, game world topology, and hardware, it represents the undisclosed inner workings of the game and allows us to "act meaningfully" (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 2). Avatar-as-interface comprises two conjoined parts: the character we control on screen and the disembodied "avatarial camera" (Klevjer 2022, p. 22). These two distinct formal properties are nevertheless directly linked in the kind of games I am interested in: I control the character and simultaneously the camera shifts.[6] As I will

[6] For a comprehensive discussion about this "full dual-locus configuration" of avatar and camera, see Klevjer (2002, pp. 147-171): "Dual-locus configurations imply a relative

argue throughout this thesis, the *avatar-as-interface* becomes a focal point for accessing the game system: our entry point into the interface, that enables us to orient within the game and that, in turn, orients us back. This happens through:

- gameplay logics (we use the avatar to solve gameplay problems, and we solve gameplay problems to enhance the avatar's capability)
- social context (we pick an avatar based on our preexisting desires, we strive to collect characters/cosmetics based on the context of the game within broader social life, online communities, and existing aesthetic sensibilities)
- affective context (avatar's movement has some tactility, perceived weight; it usually has some sort of sound design and aesthetic dimension)
- spatial orientation (it is through the avatar that we traverse the gameworld, orient our overhead camera alongside it—it is through the avatar that we shift our viewpoint, oftentimes it is our avatar's capabilities that are directly related to how we are even able to traverse the world as such)
- narrative orientation (the avatar is a part of a fictional universe, it usually has relationships with other in-game characters and plays a role within the game's narrative)
- temporal orientation (via avatar and its actions, we enter into temporal relationships with the game systems and their logics)

Whether this interfacing occurs at the level of direct control of the game character or via game menu or even extra-fictionally (on an official website), there is always the *avatar-as-interface* that will ultimately be part of these exchanges. Avatar is therefore either *the reason* for some interfacing action or *effects* these within the gameworld interface.

The totality of the game systems that are in a constant push and pull with the player's agency, interfacing with it through the avatar, is the source of the game's ideology.

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independence between the subjective and the objective dimension of the avatar, and a relative independence between action and perception. (Klevjer, 2022, p. 157)

If we look closely at the differences between 2D and 3D avatar-based games such as *Hyperlight Drifter* (Heart Machine, 2016) and *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2023), respectively, we can plot their differences across multiple categories:

2D avatar-based games	**3D avatar-based game 3rd person games**
(kinetic) stylisation	(kinetic) realism
xy spatial orientation	xyz spatial orientation
clearly altered perspective	seemingly natural(ized) perspective
(body) stylisation	body (realism)
(cinematic) constraint	(cinematic) freedom
(world) coherence low	(world) coherence high
low-tech affect	hi-tech affect

It should be noted that these are not clear-cut categories with rigid boundaries, as is evident from borderline cases such as 3D games with 2D characters like *Paradise Killer* (Kaizen Game Works, 2020). Rather, they represent intensities and gradients. These relate to both formal properties and perceived qualities/affective charges of the respective games. Therefore, the categories are conditioned by their historical/media context: they were constructed in summer 2025 and would not make much sense in, for example, the 1990s. I will now briefly comment on each category:

(Kinetic and body) stylisation/(kinetic and body) realism

2D games, for the most part, are not known for realistically depicting players' movement. On the other hand, 3D games are often much more realistic in the way they model the virtual body's physique and kinetic properties. 3D avatar-based games also tend to be much more realistic when it comes to their stylization and the way they attempt to capture the "real world". Examples: *Hotline Miami* (Dennaton Games, 2012) x *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019).

Granularity of spatial orientation

While 2D games remain constrained by the flatness of their representation, 3D gameworlds tend to be much more complex in their spatial properties and required orientations, making avatars especially useful both as traversal tools and as orientation devices. Examples: *Vampire Survivors* (Poncle, 2021) x *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011).

Clearly altered perspective/seemingly natural(ized) perspective

In contrast to 2D games, 3D avatar-based games often present a much more "natural" perspective from the point of view of the overhead camera, the one seemingly more similar to the way players usually perceive the world. I call it "natural(ized)" perspective to draw attention to the fact that it is, too, historically conditioned. Yet, it is this naturalisation that is an important factor in any ideological analysis. Examples: *Hollow Knight* (Team Cherry, 2017) x *Fortnite* (Epic Games, 2017)

(Cinematic) constraint /(cinematic) freedom

Movement constrained by a 2D perspective demands a constrained perspective (side-scrolling/single room/fixed camera angle). At the same time, 3D cinematic devices can be much freer, offering a different kind of cinematic freedom for the player to orient themselves within the world. Examples: *Hades* (Supergiant Games, 2019) x *Resident Evil* 4 (Capcom, 2005)

(World) realism low/(world) realism high

All of the above leads to different levels of verisimilitude of the worlds usually portrayed within 2D and 3D space, e.g., the way the real world's topology gets captured by these differing game genres. Examples: *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe, 2016) x *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo, 2023)

Low-tech affect/hi-tech affect

Lastly, 2D games are often viewed as less technologically advanced than their 3D counterparts. This is important because technology is directly implicated in the transcendent promises of the avatar (de Wildt et al., 2019). Examples: *Omori* (OMOCAT, 2020) x *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2023)

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to exhaustively inquire into the differences between these preliminary categories. Rather, they serve here to undergird an argument as to why I chose 3D avatars as my main interest. As Klevjer (2022, p. 169) states: "The 3D avatar is a particular type of avatar, a subjective avatar, which mediates fictional embodiment in a more radical sense than the purely extended avatar of 2D gameworlds. (...) This prosthetic continuity unifies perception and action, and constructs a vicarious body that reflects the dual nature of the body as both subject and object in the world that it inhabits."

This unification of perception and action through the proxy body enables a different kind of ideological effect than in other types of video game embodiment—one that is homologically tied to the way we inhabit the 'real' world.[7] Klevjer (2022) deals with this divide with 2D and 3D avatars extensively:

> The 3D avatar offers not only realistic agency and tangibility, but also realistically situated and embodied agency, via the cinematic prosthesis. (...) Motion (or self-movement), because it is a fundamental capacity of perception, is a defining characteristic of this form of realistic interaction; visual detail and verisimilitude is not merely a matter of looking at, but a matter of moving around, of exploring the nuances of the environment and the autonomy of everything that goes on in the simulated World. (Klevjer 2022, p. 189)

Klevjer (2022, p. 149) calls the 3D avatar a "subjective avatar" that "appropriates a navigable point of view as an apparatus of prosthetic perception, giving the player not just an extended fictional body, but also a recentered perceptual subject-position." This is crucial—by coupling the perception of the simulated gameworld with the avatar, we find ourselves in a very different subjective relation to the world as such. This role of the avatar in the construction of our subjective experience of the gameworld bears important implications for the role of ideology, as I will discuss in the case studies that will follow.

As will be apparent in Chapters 1 and 2, no less important is the fact that the games I want to discuss employ the third-person camera, meaning that our avatar's body is

[7]Klevjer (2022, p. 98) discusses this aspect of the avatarhood phenomenologically by drawing from Merleau-Ponty's work: "Like a typewriter, the avatar integrates with the body and sets up a new space of affordances, a new bodily space". This will be significant in Chapter 2.

visible at all times. This enables the avatar to function more like a mirror of the player, highlighting the bodily abstraction that will become a central focus of my analysis—that is, the way the human body is abstracted in the service of the affective regime the game employs. The visibility of the vicarious body is important, in part, also because it enables a different kind of kinaesthetic/representational pleasure derived from watching our proxy body move through the world (while helping us perceive it). This aspect will have important implications for the subversive uses of avatars elucidated in the last chapter. Again, Klevjer (2022, p. 169) sums it eloquently, implicitly hinting at the affective dimension:

> Whereas the first-person avatar is radically situated and radically prosthetic, the dual-locus avatar allows a varying degree of relative independence between the player, the extended avatar, and the intelligent follow-cam. This makes avatarial embodiment looser and more flexible, and lends itself better to the elaboration of character and story during play.

Embodied Ideology

I understand ideology as reflecting the ideas of the (capitalist) ruling class (Marx & Engels, 1970) and, through the Marxist lens, view it as integral to the reproduction of the relations of production (Althusser, 2014, p. 232), or more precisely, conditions that give rise to these relations (Cassar, 2013, p. 336). Ideology is thus related to the way ideas are deployed to sustain uneven/hierarchical power relations (Cassar, 2013, p. 335).

Games of Empire by Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter (2009) remains one of the most influential ideological critiques of games. Although released in 2009, the book remains a key piece that situates video games as part of the global capitalist economy, both in their content and the way video games and hardware are being produced. The authors see games as deeply ideological, since, as a media form, video games are enmeshed in "immaterial labor" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2013, p. 3) and blur boundaries between work and play: "It is now all games—silly games, time-wasting games, fantastic orc-slaying and alien-blasting games—that are seen as beneficial for an immaterial labor force." (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2013, p. 30). They see games as a key part of "cognitive capitalism". (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2013, p. 37). Today, similar criticism to that levied against "platform capitalism"

(Srnicek, 2017) or data-capturing "vectoralist class" (Wark, 2021) could be directed at video games. While this thesis does not deal directly with the relationship between work and play, it is nevertheless informed by the perspective that views these two spheres of life as interconnected. From games serving as models for the economy and society more and more structured by algorithms (Wark, 2009), training tools for future workplaces (Kunzelman, 2022, p. 55), and blending personal management tasks with gameplay (Anable, 2018, p. 71), I view games as never too far removed from fundamental questions of material conditions.

When Witheford & de Peuter (2009) take note that the pastoral Middle Ages fantasy of *World of Warcraft* "shares with many other fantasy role-playing MMOs a paradoxical convention: the market economy" (p. 137). The capitalist mode of production permeates the whole gameworld. To put it simply: ideology is the reason why, while they could have made virtually anything, the authors of *World of Warcraft* decided to depict a capitalist economy on the backdrop of feudal imagination.

As I will argue, the ideology always has a particular affect (emotional orientation) that is channeled through the avatar-as-interface. We never encounter it from some neutral, distanced point of view, but are necessarily embodying it. Just as we are under ideological effects in our everyday life, altering our bodies in the process, something similar happens with vicarious bodies in a 3D game.

And, as should now be clear, *Avatar-as-interface* is thus necessarily embodied:

> One of the reasons why avatar-based games appeal to us is precisely because the principle of the avatar is grounded in, and plays with, the general phenomenology of the body. It is the mediation of embodied agency that makes us relate to the avatar intuitively as an 'I can', and which enables us to experience a simulated environment as something that we can inhabit; a 'world' that we belong to. When playing make-believe through the mediation of avatars, there is no need to explain engagement and immersion in terms of mechanisms of 'identification' or similar kinds of bonding between the player and the (sometimes humanoid) avatars. (Klevjer 2022, p. 95)

Though some literature (Bourassa & Richert, 2022) posits that non-playable characters and, for example, indirectly controllable characters found in *The Sims*

(Waszkiewicz, 2020, p. 14), are avatars too, this is insufficient to make them part of the ideological critique of the embodied player-game circuit as it represents an understanding of avatarhood that does not take the perceiving human player-subject into account. In the strictest sense of the word, an algorithm controlling the movement of an in-game NPC character has, indeed, an avatar in the 3D model it "inhabits", but this similarity is only formal.

The avatar is tied to a particular type of ludic subjecthood as per Daniel Vella (2016). Vella (2016, p. 2) defines ludic subject-position and ludic subject as "the 'I' the player adopts while playing a game. The ludic subject position is "'the perceptual standpoint' the player adopts in relation to the gameworld" (Vella, 2016, p. 2). The avatarhood I am interested in falls into the "embodied ludic subjectivity" category, represented by either single or multiple characters that are directly controllable by the player via inhabiting their bodies.

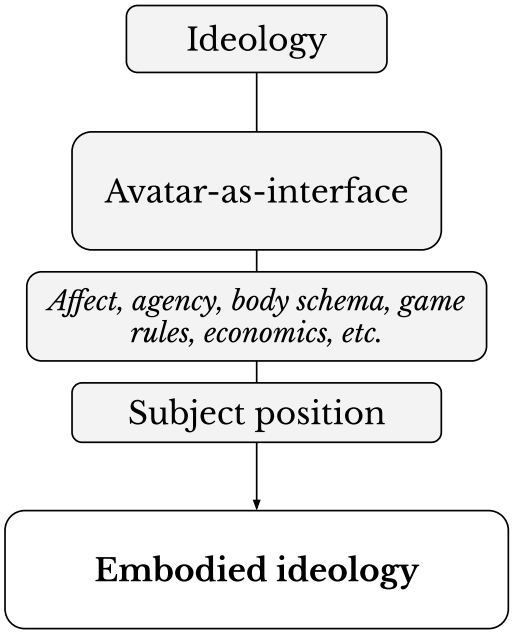
While characters in, for example, *The Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2014) are somewhat directly controllable, the additional layer of controls (clicking from the top-down, what Vella (2016, p.10) calls "transcendent ludic subjectivity") creates a further distance (found in most turn-based games or CRPGs). While this position is of course not free from ideological effects, the affective situation encompassing the utterance "I was killed," as is the case in the embodied ludic position, is nevertheless different. Vella (2016, p. 5) uses the term *body schema*, "a cognitive image of one's bodily existence within the world", upended and sustained by the virtual world's structure. I am interested in the body schema that results from the direct kinesthetic control of the avatar and its effects. It is a body schema that results from the unification of perception and action, as described in the previous section.

Therefore, the movement and basic navigation (e.g., the main game camera) are directly tied to the embodied ludic subject position. What appears to us as a natural way to control a game is, indeed, a case of contested space where ideology and resulting "avatar economies" (van Ryn et al., 2018) are at play.

According to Vella (2013, p. 5), the affordances of the avatarial virtual body (moveset, perspective, possible actions) are the constituting factors of the process of incorporation of the player into the digital world. They are directly related to how we inhabit these realms, which subjective position and relation to that world we assume.

Avatar and its properties thus cannot be uncoupled from ideological effects—they permeate both the world, the environment, and the game interface itself.

The schematic representing the model looks like this:



Structure and Method of This Thesis

The primary aim of this thesis is to investigate various ways the ideology overlaps with avatars. To this end, it combines exploration of existing literature related to both avatars and (more generally) the ideology of video games and looks for interesting intersections. These intersections are not only illustrated but worked through a series of in-depth case studies. Kristine Jørgensen (2013, p. 11) writes that "games are activities, and activities are best understood when carried out. Playing games is therefore essential when we want to understand games and how they work in practice." Therefore, the selected games were, unless stated otherwise, played firstly in a non-focused, leisurely way, and then replayed multiple times with a continuously developing critical apparatus in mind. Subsequent chapters not only further develop arguments in the previous case studies but refine them as well, painting a multifaceted conceptual picture of avatarial ideology in the process.

Althusser's (2014) critique of ideology serves as a starting point. While not without issues, this promising theoretical perspective can help shed light on ideological effects of video game avatars as well as their concrete realizations in the way they structure our being in the virtual world through the affordances of the embodied 3D character.

In the first chapter, I will consider Interpellation (Althusser 2014, p. 264), a key concept in Althusserian ideology critique—the process through which ideology "'recruits' subjects among the individuals (…), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects." I will discuss Althusser's own writing as well as subsequent game studies scholarship. I will propose a model of interpellation that can be understood through the avatar body and apply it to the case of open-world free-to-play RPG *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo, 2020). This chapter will draw attention to the way ideology enframes the game world in an instrumental way through the avatar.

The second chapter will then explore the phenomenological and affective aspects hinted at in the first one, namely rhythms, affects, and temporality. It will build on contemporary scholarship related to cybernetic embodiment (namely Keogh (2018)) to interrogate fruitful points where ideology critique can be brought back into the frame: problematizing some aspects of posthuman embodiment in the process. *Armored Core VI* (FromSoftware, Inc., 2023), with its emphasis on avatar-body recombination, is close-played to develop these arguments further. It serves as an allegory for the player-avatar relationship as well as a site where various (ideologically underpinned) modulations of this relation take place.

The final chapter of this thesis turns towards the potential of the ideology critique within video games and video game art. It asks whether video games can wrest themselves out of the grasp of ideology and subvert it, specifically in the context of avatar-as-interface and the bodily abstraction it entails. I will work through three shorter case studies of games: *Bad Corgi* (Cheng, 2016), *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019), and *Baby Steps* (Bloch et al, 2025) all show possible pathways games can take to resist the ideology embedded with the figure of the (3D) avatar.

I will then conclude by discussing liminal cases, blank spots, and avenues for further research.

I also need to mention a few important caveats when it comes to the following interpretation. First, I analyzed the abovementioned games solely from the single-player perspective, disregarding their online, multiplayer components. I will touch upon these briefly in the discussion section. Secondly, Klevjer's (2022, p. 169) discussion about different interfaces (touch-screen, keyboard, gamepad etc.) and their relevance for avatar embodiment prompts me to note that while there is a

difference between playing *Genshin Impact* on a PC with a controller and using touch-screen on a mobile device, I did not discriminate between these in this dissertation due to the theoretical constraints. Likewise, due to my structural perspective, I did not focus too much on the sound design of the respective games (arguably a somewhat important affective register). Unless relevant to the embodiment as such, I did not discuss or analyze the narratives of the mentioned games. Nevertheless, I will make some preliminary observations in the last chapter. Other limits of my perspective are elaborated upon in the conclusion and discussion chapter.

Lastly, my own approach is informed by Bódi (2022, p. 43), who writes that "the framework proposed [in her book] is not a map of how agency is manifested in all avatar-based video games, but it is designed to be used in asking interesting questions about such video games." Similarly, my framework does not and cannot include *all* forms of avatar-based games and their ideologies. Rather, I hope that many interesting (and, hopefully, crucial) questions will emerge, ultimately allowing us to understand our relationship with avatar-based media better.

1. Hey You, Anime Avatar: Interpellation and Virtual Bodies in *Genshin Impact*



Fig. 2: Genshin Impact character Sucrose with the vast open world behind her.

Genshin Impact (miHoYo, 2020) holds me close. The open-world role-playing game full of colorful, cute anime characters can paint almost pastoral views. Cities and peaks shrouded in mist in the distance, sunlit fields stretching to the horizon, a jungle full of dancing mushrooms as my character runs by, on the quest to find their sibling. Also, the same world that can conjure almost romantic scenes and serene vistas makes me painfully aware at every turn that it is here to make money.

As a hugely popular game with between 1.2 and 2 million daily players[8] (MMO-Population, 2025; ActivePlayer, 2025), *Genshin Impact* is emblematic of the business model of so-called free-to-play video games. I assemble my team of anime

[8] Based on estimations provided in August 2025 by MMO-Population (2025) and ActivePlayer (2025). According to the second one, there were ~11 million monthly users (with around 28 million monthly users in August 2025).

heroes and heroines and embark upon thrilling adventures, only to find myself caught in the web of intricate systems that permeate my every step. Their goal: to tie me to the gameworld, make it my habit, and ultimately, to make me spend money in the in-game shop. And, as I will argue in this chapter, the avatar through which I experience all this is of utmost importance.

1.1 Into the Game Ideology

In game studies, there is a long-running tradition of critically examining the ideological underpinnings of video games. It focuses on the formal structures as well as the surrounding cultural, social, or media-specific contexts. The schools of thought and/or fields are numerous, ranging from political economy (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2013; Hauer, 2023) to postcolonial studies (Mukherjee, 2017), gender/queer theory (Ruberg, 2019), and critical cybernetic theory (Ash, 2015).

The strong presence of the Marxist perspective is well-documented (Cassar, 2013); yet, surprisingly little attention is given to the late-Marxist Althusserian tradition. While Althusser and his ideas about structural aspects of ideology make appearances in a body of scholarly work dedicated to video games[9], thorough examinations are somewhat scarce.

This chapter aims to utilize Althusserian concepts of ideology and interpellation as starting points towards a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between avatarhood and its political effects. Building upon the Althusserian scholarship present in game studies, I will both apply it and expand upon it by examining *Genshin Impact* and the way interpellation is channeled through the avatar inhabiting an open world.

Interpellation, emblematic of the ideological effects on subjects, will be proposed as a unifying and/or underpinning perspective for other theoretical frameworks that will follow in subsequent chapters. I will argue that interpellation, because of being deeply interwoven with questions of subjecthood and the self-conception, is a fruitful, if not perfect, tool of the video game critical arsenal—one that is useful for interpreting current video games and their political contexts, providing a lens to tie

[9]Most notably, these include Keever (2022), Garite (2003), Bourassa & Richert (2022), and Richert et al. (2023).

together formal/economic structure and the effects the virtual embodiment as on our experience of video game play. I will tie interpellation into the avatar-as-interface complex.

1.1.1 From a False Consciousness to Interpellation

Ideology present in all cultural artifacts, including games, is deeply related to the question of naturalization, of what Jon Bailes (2019, p. 2) calls "common sense that tells us what is expected of us and what should make us happy." We can then view games as either imposing these seemingly neutral viewpoints onto us (Garite, 2003) or as reflections of ideology in society at large (Bailes, 2019, p. 5)[10], hiding tensions and irresolvable conflicts within their worlds (Bailes, 2019, p. 5). A crucial question and a point of contestation emerge: freedom. The question of freedom is rhetorically related to games like *Genshin Impact,* since what is integral to the genre of open world is a promise of freedom.[11] Yet, "In 'open world' games, especially, where players are allowed to roam large, non-linear environments and encouraged to 'do anything,' the array of possibilities obscures the underlying rigidity in the system of rules itself, and that all the choices available fulfill individualistic (and violent) desires." (Bailes, 2019, p. 9) Using Jørgensen's (2013, p. 110) insights into the ways players interpret games, we can understand open-world as a "mindset" that frames a specific experience or activity: "Just like the game frames information in different ways, players also use frames in their interpretation of different situations. For the player, it is essential to take on a ludic mindset when playing." (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 110)

As we will see in the next section, freedom is a necessary component of ideology—for Althusser, the subjugation to ideology is always partly voluntary (Althusser, 2014, p. 205). Or, as Dyer-Witherford and De Peuter (2013, p. 192) explain: "Interactivity does not mean virtual play is free from ideology; rather, it intensifies the sense of free will necessary for ideology to work really well. Players, on their own choice, rehearse socially stipulated subjectivities."

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[10] Bailes (2019, p. 5) draws attention to the fact that games can and do reflect their surrounding ideologies (and their effect on society) without necessarily addressing them directly: "I see power fantasies in these games as largely *unconscious* attempts to resolve social issues that they cannot *explicitly* recognize or formulate."

[11] Bettina Bódi uses the term "game design lineages" (Bateman & Zagal, 2018, as cited in Bódi, 2022, p. 3) for "traceable lines of inspiration and evolution in game design practice over time, as enabled by technological progress and player practices." (Bódi, 2022, p.3)

Whenever games and ideology are discussed, the perspective of procedural rhetorics by Ian Bogost (2010) needs to be mentioned. A now ubiquitous term refers to the fact that video games are systems of rules and that these rules and their interactions give rise to forms of expression not based on text, sound, or images. The ideological critique then posits that it is through this rhetoric that games construct allegories of the real world. Hauer (2023) gives a clear example: *Age of Empires II* (Microsoft, 2019) imagines medieval warfare as, ultimately, a game of resources and exchange. An often-cited example is *Civilization* (MicroProse, 1991). This game not only embeds within its rules the logic of expansion and colonization, but also valorizes the player's actions in various ways. (Mukherjee, 2017, p. 92)

A procedural rhetoric perspective influences my work: that games are necessarily imbued with various systems enacting demands upon the players, circumscribing how we, as players, can relate to the gameworlds.

Yet, as Brendan Keogh contends in his book *A Play of Bodies*: “videogames are not a core game wrapped in an interchangeable audiovisual skin; videogames are materially constituted by their audiovisuality” (Keogh 2018, p. 12). An image of video game totality emerges, one that wrestles the interpellation out from the confines of procedurality. While I delve into cybernetic critique later in this thesis, it is critical not to privilege systemic properties of games over the affective force of their audiovisual components, their animations, styles, iconographies, avatar body types, and UI design. Or, to put it via Jørgensen (2013, p. 10): “As an integral part of the gameworld, the game user interface should be understood as part of the content of the game and not as a separate layer of information.”

1.2 Interpellation

Influential French philosopher Louis Althusser is most known for bringing a structuralist perspective to the Marxist tradition, favoring impersonal processes of which the individual human subject is a secondary effect. Althusser's theoretical oeuvre and legacy are stained by his murder of his wife (on, legally speaking, account

of mental illness)[12], yet his influence can be traced across many disciplines (Lewis, 2022).

It is Althusser's structural approach to ideology that represents a fruitful perspective for game studies and the aims of my thesis—namely, to map how properties of a given game world, channeled through the avatar, give rise to ideological effects.

In the seminal essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, Althusser (2014, p. 232) distinguishes between State Apparatuses (SA) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA), all complicit in reproducing the relations of production. (Althusser, 2014, p. 232) State Apparatuses, such as the police, keep the hierarchical structure of social classes in place mostly by repression (and secondarily through what Althusser calls ideology). (Althusser, 2014, p. 244) Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) are constructed in the opposite way: They work predominantly by ideology, secondarily by repression. ISAs entail religion, education, media, family structure, and others—operating on a level of *superstructure* that is constitutive, but distinct from the modes of production. (Althusser, 2014, p. 243) Yet they constitute "not only the stake, but also the site of class struggle, and often of bitter forms of class struggle" (Althusser, 2014, p. 245), integral for sustaining the hegemonic order. Ideology is implicated in reproducing the relations of production, including the so-called "private" space of family, church, or, in our case, any game world one decides to enter.

Ideology is, for Althusser, "'representation' of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their real conditions of existence." (Althusser, 2014, p. 256) This representation does not only take the form of images or media products, but more importantly, ritualized practices that are constitutive of the self as a subject within a given social context. The ideology is then tied to the subject's *place* within a given social context, a local positioning of the individual subject, and the totality of social structures with which he faces. (Richert et al., 2023, p. 2) Ideology is what bridges this gap between an individual and the overarching structure, since it constitutes a symbolic order of reference, allowing individuals to situate themselves in the social world (Richert et al., 2023, p. 2). What is important is that this situating is tied to our perceptions and other mental faculties. (Richert et. al, 2023, p. 3) Or, similarly, Sicart

[12] For a discussion about Althusser's personal life, the murder of his wife Hélène Rytmann-Légotien, and how this impacted the legacy of his thought, see Seymour (2017) and W. S. Lewis (2019).

(2003, p. 3) understands "[i]deology as a structure is the mediation of the individual as subject with the Power of the state."

Althusser introduces the key term *interpellation* that is used to describe an effect that Ideological State Apparatuses have on the formation of the subject: "I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing" (Althusser, 2014, p. 264). In *Ideology and State Apparatuses*, Althusser gives an example of a policeman walking on a street and addressing us "hey you". (Althusser, 2014, p. 264) Upon being hailed, we turn around, recognizing that it was us who were really addressed. We feel the demand placed upon us by the apparatus, condensed in the utterance "hey you".

For Keever (2022), Althusser's example is a bit opaque since it confuses the state apparatus (a policeman) with the ideological state apparatus (the utterance itself). More precisely, the "you" we recognize is the descriptor of our singular self embedded within a particular social context. The interpellation is thus inextricably tied with the constitution of us as a subject. The free acting subject, so emblematic of the (especially neoliberal) capitalist consciousness, is—for Althusser—an ideological effect, a naturalization of an outside force that constitutes it from the moment one is born and is constantly addressed by a multitude of State and Ideological State Apparatuses. As Garite (2003, p. 5) states: "Within ideology, it appears 'obvious' that people are unique, distinguishable, irreplaceable identities—and that, as autonomous individuals, they possess a certain kind of subjectivity or consciousness which is the ultimate source of their beliefs and actions, independent of the world around them."

Althusser (2014, p. 260) puts emphasis on the fact that interpellation is habitual, making its effects naturalized. A feedback loop emerges: we can be interpellated because various social rituals have habitually conditioned us. The Althusserian notion of ideology does not lie in some grand gestures, but in the minutiae of everyday utterances, practices, and rituals that, through naturalization, recede into the background. From there, beneath our perception and conscious interrogation, they continue to produce ideological effects.

This emphasis on habituation and *activity* is important, since, as Sicart's (2003) critique of *The Sims* shows, one can easily overlook this aspect in Althusser's account of ideology. Game like *Genshin Impact* (or *The Sims* for that matter) is both a representation in the way its fiction and game rules are constructed (valorizing various activities, having concrete values regarding what is a "good life" inscribed in them), and an interpellative device that puts us into a particular subject position. Here I am in agreement with (post-)marxist view of ideology as co-constitutive of us as subjects that are not "discrete entities, but are always caught up in an immanent network in which they are actively further individuated and produced" or, to use Deleuzian language, always "becoming". (Kordela, 2023, p. 2)[13] In the context of recent game studies scholarly work, subjectivation is further elucidated by Kunzelman (2022, p. 86):

> "Via play, players are subjectivated by a process that encompasses them and demands that they interact with the game in a certain way lest they fail immediately, and across a playthrough that becomes naturalized to the point where that friction is no longer recognized. (…) This automatic learning process, with the behaviours I have absorbed with them, is subjectivation." (86)

As Keever (2022) sums up: "Ideology is no longer an aspect of consciousness, but a process of subject formation beneath consciousness, which guides consciousness while never rising to the level of consciousness as such—not thought but lived (..) It is expressed via practice and formed through material rituals." Sicart (2003, p. 4) agrees: "Ideology is a subconscious structure[.] (…) Ideology represents the subject relation with the institutions of power from a prerational state."

Althusserian ideology is "habitual, repetitive and widely distributed in the social world" (Richert et al., 2023, p. 4). The ideology is fragmentary, and interpellation is being distributed across a plethora of apparatuses and their constituent parts. As approaches to Althusser through affect point out, the "you" itself is effective in part

[13] Kordela (2023) also interestingly re-reads Marx as a thinker of "mutual transproduction of thought and material reality" and calls the often-used distinction between primary base and secondary superstructure a "misconception" (Kordela, 2023, p. 10). She specifically mentions Althusser as a thinker who "attempted to correct [this misconception] by pointing to the inseparability of the relations of production from the legal, social, political, and intellectual life." (Kordela, 2023, p. 10.) To this list, we might add: and video games, too.

because it is tied to our bodily sensations. (Richert et al., 2023, p. 7). Every interpellation has an aesthetic and emotional dimension, "eminently sensory character" (Richert et. al., 2023, p. 3) like the tone of the police officer's voice in Althusser's example. This decentered, habitual, and affective nature of ideology finds itself at home in video games, complex, multimedia cultural artifacts.

Ideology, as understood per Althusser (2014, p. 262), echoes psychoanalytic language with its insistence on the "transhistorical" effect of the outside subjectivating force. Keever (2022): "What is misrecognized as the subject's interior consciousness is always a secondary consequence of an exterior condition. (...)". For Althusser, the interpellating act, the "you" isolates humans as concrete subjects, creates the self as an "organized entity with definitive boundaries". (Keever, 2022) Ideology is from the very start implicated in the self-conception of a human subject, which is partly its product.

The interpellation theory of ideology represents a view of a (player) subject that is always already under the effect of ideology.[14] Players act as if ideological effects are natural to their selfhood. The ideology has its origin outside of the self, yet actualizes itself inside it.

Understood this way, video games are a site of interpellation by Ideological State Apparatuses par excellence. There are a multitude of interpellations happening at once, depending on the genre of the game and the game situation one finds herself in. There's a level of the game rules, of the affordances of the virtual world, the economic structure of the game, which—especially in the case of free-to-play titles—reaches beyond the unsteady confines of the game artifact itself or even game communities.

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[14] Althusser goes as far as to make a contested claim, that "ideology has no history" (Althusser, 2014, p.4), hinting that the outside is impossible and—unlike the false consciousness of Marx and Engels (1970)—there are no real conditions that can be unmasked. The ideology is always there, always already forming us as subjects. Arguably, the most important critical text on Althusser's concept of Ideology (with its supposed ahistoricity as a main point of contention) is, with a little doubt, *The Orrery of Errors* by E.P. Thompson (1978). In the context of game studies, Cassar (2013) explores the supposed inescapability of Ideological State Apparatuses through Gramsci's theory of hegemony.

In the case of *Genshin Impact*, this means that we should not understand the gameworld and its workings as isolated from outside society. The free-to-play model and affective structure can be effective insofar as they occur within a capitalist, unequal society. Similarly, the game community that reinforces particular ideology (for example, completionist attitude towards character collection or, perhaps, even distanced cynicism towards gacha mechanics) does not operate in a vacuum, simply choosing to act in a certain way. Material reality of their members, of Genshin Impact as a cultural artifact, and the ways we approach it, informed by all the other cultures that preceded it (like anime and other open-world games), play a huge role. Ultimately, this means that the individualistic fantasy of self-actualisation as the world's explorer is partly predicated on the already existing mental structure of what it means to be a subject in contemporary society.

Lastly, Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter (2013, p. 192) relate the game subject positions adopted by players (by the force of the interpellation) to global capitalism: "Games are machines of 'subjectivation'. (...) But such in-game identities are never entirely separated from the options provided by the actual social formations in which the games are set, from which their virtualities derive and into which they flow back. Game virtualities remove us from, but also prepare us for, these actual subject positions. (...) consumer, commander, commanded, cyborg, criminal."

Avatar-as-interface is a site through which this multiplicity of interpellations takes place, extending from the virtual body through the screen, affecting the physical reality of the player in various ways.

1.3 Interpellation in Games: A Case Study of *Genshin Impact*



Fig. 3: A part of the open world Teyvat in Genshin Impact.

What, therefore, would interpellation mean for a video game with 3D avatars? I attempt to answer this question by close-playing *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo, 2020), and not only because my love-hate relationship with its myriad systems and beautiful world was a motivating factor for this thesis.

There are many games with 3D avatars, some of them utilizing the free-to-play model with its stealthy monetization tactics: *Overwatch 2 (Blizzard Entertainment, 2022), Fortnite (Epic Games, 2017), PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG Corporation, 2017), Warframe (Digital Extremes, 2013), Honkai: Stara Rail (miHoYo, 2023)*, just to name a few. These all could be analyzed through an Althusserian lens. Yet, something crucial happens when we add an open world.

Open worlds have traditionally been positioned as places of player freedom, self-actualising narratives, or playgrounds of exploration. While all these facets are at play to varying degrees in Teyvat, the world of *Genshin Impact*, the overarching free-to-play impulse of the game's business model represents a structure that ties them all together. An affective force flows through the avatar to and from the player.

And interpellation, understood as the act of ideological effectuation, can serve as a critical lens to unite disparate elements at play.

1.3.1 Welcome to Teyvat

In September 2025, by rough estimates, *Genshin Impact* had nearly 16 million monthly active players (ActivePlayer, 2025). The game developed by the Chinese company miHoYo (2020) routinely ranks among the most popular free-to-play titles, that is, games that are available for free, but which offer premium items and/or features for players to buy.

In *Genshin Impact*, players take on the role of a titular "traveller", thrown into the magical world of Teyvat in order to find their brother. As a typical third-person game, the player avatar is at all times centered on the screen, the player situated in a position of an overhead camera. *Genshin Impact* is an open-world RPG: there is no prescribed path players need to take when exploring the world, and the game puts big emphasis on player characters and gradually enhancing their abilities (stats). Drawing heavily from the anime aesthetic, the world of *Genshin Impact* is colorful, with whimsical animations and sound effects.



Fig. 4: Genshin Impact party screen. Icons above the characters' heads show the element they belong to.

The main storyline and quest for a lost sibling is but one of many activities players can undertake in the five regions of Teyvat.[15] The game contains a multitude of optional side quests, special semi-randomized challenges, time-limited events, dungeons, and much more. I will discuss some of these in detail in the following section.

The central component of gameplay is the "party" (Fig. 4), consisting of four characters. After they pre-select them from their collection, players can switch between characters almost at any time. These characters are divided into seven different elements (fire = pyro, wind = anemo, electricity = electro, nature = dendro, hydro = water, earth = geo) with mutual synergies, making it impossible or considerably harder to complete some in-game challenges unless players' party includes a specific combination of them. For example, enemies scattered across the game world also belong to different elements, making them stronger or weaker against some of them: for example, when I hit a blob-like Hydro Slime with Lisa's electric attack, it will generate an "electro-charged" effect, greatly increasing my damage. Moreover, each character comes with its own story, personality, lore, and unlockable conversations to further expose its backstory.

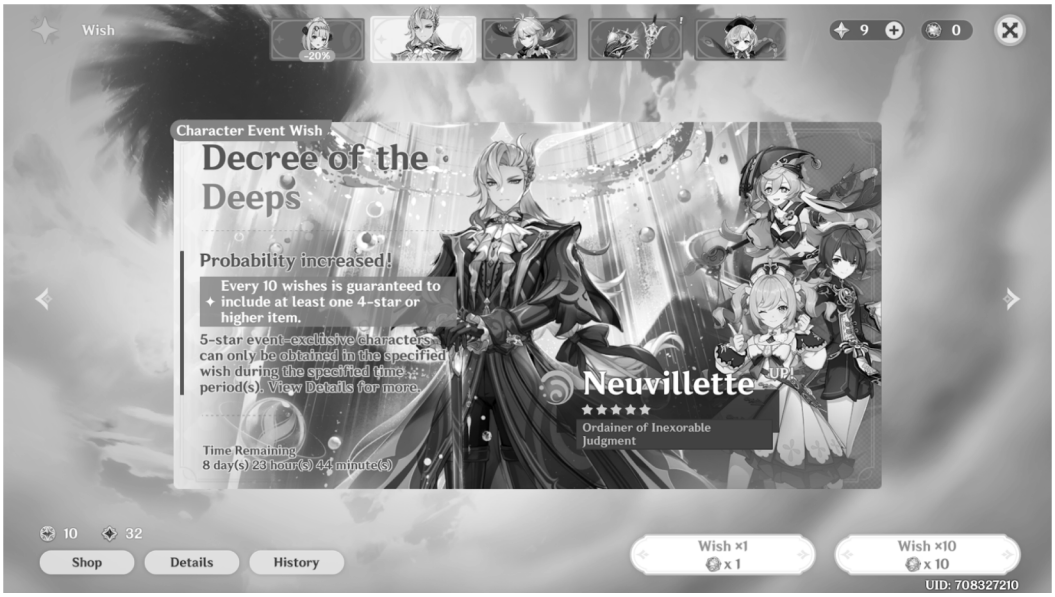

Fig. 5: Wish screen, from where players buy randomized packs with characters and weapons.

[15] The game is continuously being updated with new territories added semi-regularly.

Characters are collected through randomized packs called “Wishes” (Fig. 5), which are purchased by spending Primogems, an in-game currency. Primogems are obtained by playing the game, but can be bought for real money. The randomized packs (colloquially called loot boxes) contain not only characters, but pieces of their equipment as well. Since a large chunk of *Genshin Impact* gameplay consists of combat, players usually have to have a decently powerful party of different characters (it is needed to quickly swap them out, in real-time, during encounters) to be successful.

Due to the inclusion of the Wish mechanic, *Genshin Impact* belongs to the so-called “gacha” genre. Woods (2022, p. 1076) describes the gacha mechanic as one that “incentivizes players to buy or accumulate in-game currency which can be used to obtain randomized virtual items that much—to greater or lesser degrees—enhance or progress the game.” *Genshin Impact* represents a particular type of gacha game with a closed in-game economy (Woods, 2022, p. 1077), offering virtual rewards only.

The term "gacha" itself is somewhat contested—it is colloquially used to denote a specific type of freemium game with its origins in Japan (Famularo, 2017). While gacha is still used to describe mostly non-Western titles, the continuing convergence of successful monetary models blurs this regional distinction. (Wagner, 2023) Therefore, I think it's fruitful not to view gacha as a distinct category, one that hints at a supposed divide between “predatory” and perhaps only “problematic” freemium approaches—especially when the word gacha itself still bears a tint of exoticized regional Western/non-Western distinctions. I see games like *Genshin Impact,* their business models, and the way they structure their world as in continuity with other free-to-play games, as well as other titles in this study.

Criticism of games such as *Genshin Impact* often focuses on the way the loot box randomized mechanism works (Woods, 2022, p. 1076), the odds of obtaining a particular character, and the fairness or unfairness of the accumulation speed of in-game currency (Primogems) without spending any money. But that is only part of the picture.

Let us now turn to several examples of in-game interpellations and their ideological effects, starting precisely with this accumulation logic that is inherent not only to the logic of the player character party but also to the open world of *Genshin Impact* itself.

1.3.2 Interpellation as Rules: Progression

There are numerous progression systems (tracking player actions and rewarding them for completing specific milestones) and player goals that permeate *Genshin Impact's* open world through and through. To name just a few:

- Adventure rank (leveling points awarded for exploration, quests, and other activities)
- Adventurer's guide (concrete goals given to the player, rewarding them after completing a given number of them)
- Achievements (special awards for specific game situations or progression, for example, triggering a special elemental reaction)
- Player character level (upgradable, but also gradually increasing via in-game activities)
- Player abilities, each with its level
- Item level (one weapon + 5 "artifacts")
- Story quests, side-quests, main quest
- Exploration rewards
- Seasonal events
- Dungeons
- World bosses
- Semi-randomized progression challenge dungeons
- Cooking and crafting system



Fig. 6: One of many progression systems in Genshin Impact. Homeward Path is a special progression available to returning players after a longer break from playing the game.

Many of those systems reward players with Primogems (directly related to the character collection economy of randomized packs—Wishes) or with materials needed for other activities, such as weapon or character upgrades. Some of these activities are clearly part of the fictional world (such as story quests), some not, but still present within the game (Wish system, some of the progression systems with no justification within the game's fiction), and some are even happening outside of the game itself.

The first type of interpellation *Genshin Impact* hails players with is one bound with the myriad of interlocking systems that structure the gameplay. Each tick of a number increasing in some progression system, each animation of a reward is its own little interpellation, recruiting players to alter their playstyle.

Consider the following ten-minute-long play session:
After logging into Genshin Impact for the first time in a while, I am presented with a new season that contains a new storyline. Yet, I know I am only Adventure Rank 33, and I should probably advance further to be ready for the new content. Moreover, my characters are not leveled enough: more precisely, Collei, my Dendro (natural force in the world of the game) character, is only level 17—the rest of my party is around 50. I collect some materials from the mail that the game sometimes dispenses after scheduled maintenance and so on. I use these enhancement materials to get Collei to level 20. However, to unlock further upgrades, I need to gather additional materials. I put this need into the back of my mind and go on exploring. I check my Adventurer's Guide and a Quest Log: there is a quest I have to do nearby that will give me some more materials and a world boss I can defeat. It will advance my Adventurer's Rank, give me additional materials, and also advance my Adventurer's Guide. I teleport to the nearest point and embark on an adventure. But I realize I don't have enough healing items (food), so I start collecting some plants. I gather a few of them, then notice a notification that tells me I have Battle Pass points. I check it, collect points, and the progression system tells me that I can get more if I mine 20 ores. There's a mine nearby. I alter my path and start mining. Via exploration, I unlock a new dungeon challenge: one that contains the materials needed for Collei. But just to be sure I can make it, I check the rest of my party: I am only missing one last piece of material in order to enhance the abilities of my archer, Diona. I decide to alter my course and defeat another world boss. But on my way there, I realize I can do a daily quest nearby, awarding me with Primogems. And if I complete 4 of those today, I'll have enough Primogems for a Wish. In it, there might be a new weapon I could use to tackle the

challenges of a new region… wait: there's an unexplored part of the map nearby, and if I uncover new types of enemies, the game will reward me, too, and I might also score some achievements and get even more Primogems.

Freedom to roam the open world is subjugated to the ever-present layer instrumentalizing the traversal of Teyvat. This is similar to the "hyper-subsumption" Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter (2009, p. 150) describe: "[Subsumption describes] the way capitalism gradually envelops the entire social environment, extending itself from the workplace into ever-expanding areas of culture, changing life habits, consumption practices, political practices, and interpersonal relations. (…) [Game developers recapitulate] the accumulative structures of consumer capitalism within the archaic dream worlds of MMOs."

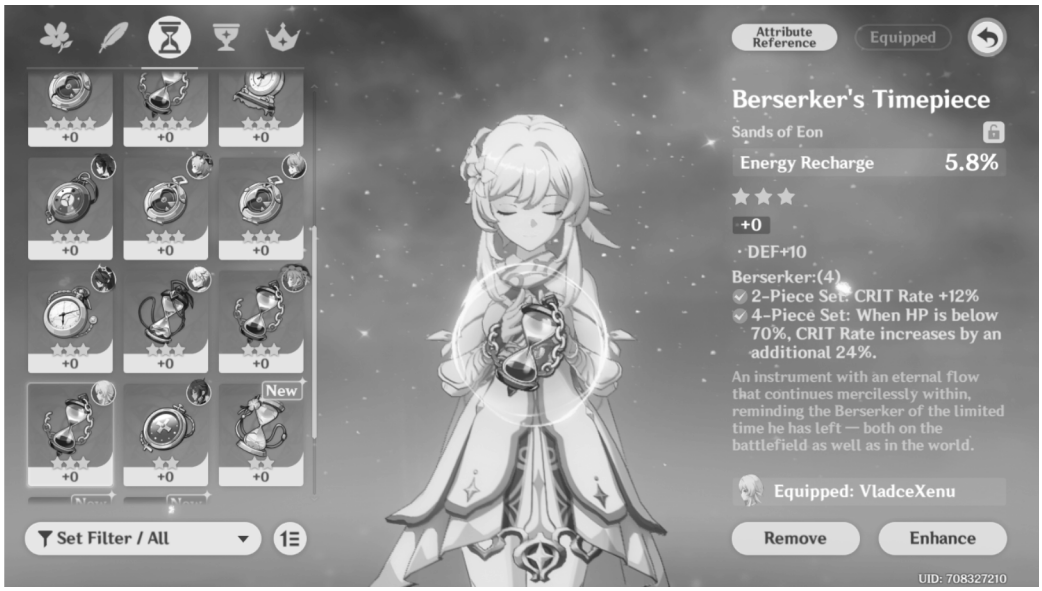

Fig. 7: Upgrading items in Genshin Impact.

Inhabiting the Instrumental Landscape

Thinking about and experiencing the world of *Genshin Impact* penetrated by instrumentalizing systems, what comes to mind is Daniel Vella's (2013; 2016) work on subjectivity in virtual worlds. While Vella is less radical in his ideological critique than Althusser, his phenomenology-inspired approach is of great use here.

For the exploration of progression systems instrumentalizing the seemingly pastoral nature of *Genshin Impact*, Vella's (2013) paper *Wanderer in the Wilderness: Being in the*

Virtual Landscape in Minecraft and Proteus is a great complementary material. In it, he specifically talks about avatar as the channel through which our sense of game place comes to be: “game environments can only be experienced through the focalizing structures that arrange themselves around the figure of the avatar, and, similarly, it makes little sense to speak of avatar without firmly contextualizing it as an entity within the game environment in which it is entrenched.” (Vella 2013, p. 4) The process through which this happens is, for Vella, necessarily linked to intelligibility—a question of a world towards which thought can be oriented.

Vella then follows by analyzing *Minecraft*, specifically its structural arrangement that presents the player (in that case, through a first-person perspective) with a concrete set of affordances. The in-game blocks can be destroyed, stored, processed, and put up again. Vella (2013, p. 7) finds this structural logic emblematic of Heidegger’s notion of “standing-reserve” as a framing device of the natural landscape, reducing it to a resource to be used, recombined, and ultimately mastered by humans. As Vella (2013, p. 8) points out, in Minecraft, a tree is never just a tree—it is composed of blocks that can be mined, stored, and then transformed into other structures and materials. According to Vella (2013, p. 9), *Minecraft* reinterprets the player's relation to the landscape (and the game world as such) as one that is instrumental: as a standing-reserve.

Avatar is a crucial component of this framing: “If the frame through which the player is made to perceive and interpret the world can be equated with the figure of the avatar, and it is the range and nature of its affordances that determine the parameters of the frame.” (Vella, 2011, p. 8) It is through the avatar and actions available to it the player of *Minecraft* “deconstructs and reconstructs the elements of the landscape”'. That results in a distinct form of inhabiting a given digital world, enframed by the affordances as one of utility and mastery:

> *“Every entity that can be perceived in the world is a potential resource to be gathered, processed, and put to use in crafting. (…) Trees can be chopped down for wood. Rock can be quarried for building material, or mined in search of coal, iron, or rarer minerals. Sheep are a source of wool; cows, of leather; pigs, of meat.“*
> (Vella, 2011, p. 8)

While players of *Genshin Impact* cannot reconstruct the landscape directly, and Vella's analysis does not apply in its entirety, it still brings into focus the important aspect, namely, avatarial affordances. What avatar can do with the landscape and to what ends necessarily frames the player's relationship to the world in some way. While *Minecraft's* instrumentality lies in the mechanical composition of the world in its blocky shapes, *Genshin Impact* relegates it to the level of overlaid progression systems.

Even if it takes the form of fictional, quasi-fictional, and overlaying interface[16], the resulting enframing of Teyvat is very similar: a map/landscape filled with instrumental tasks. While objects within the game might sometimes be aesthetically appreciated, they are ultimately reduced to resources that are harvestable and usable.

Interpellation is the (algorithmic) logic that underpins these, to put it in Heideggerian terms, Vella (2013) uses, enframing strategies. These strategies include not only the game systems themselves, but also the many ways players are made aware of the systems' existence. Notifications, animations, and reminder screens are all ways to remind players of the importance of maximizing their exploration efforts. The romantic impulse related to the open-world genre *Genshin Impact* belongs to and the aesthetic style of its world are quickly fused with the progression systems.

And, ultimately, this interpellative complex is tied back to the free-to-play economy within the game. While progression-based gameplay has become somewhat ubiquitous even in the realm of premium titles[17], systems in *Genshin Impact* are, in the end, related to the economy of Wishes and premium materials players can obtain for real money.

To paraphrase Vella (2013, p. 8) in the context of *Genshin Impact*: (Nearly) every entity that can be perceived in the world is a potential resource to be gathered, processed, and put to use in many of the progression systems. These ultimately lead to

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[16] Some of the progression systems are consistent with the fiction, such as the Adventure rank that is tracked by the in-game faction called Adventurer's Guild. Others, like achievements, are entirely decoupled from fiction.

[17] In this regard, a critical blog post by developer Keith Burgun (2022), titled *Diablo: Immortal and Aesthetic Gacha-ism*, interrogates the extent to which free-to-play mechanics have permeated games with other business models.

generating more Wishes, which generate residual currencies that can be used to advance the systems that generated Wishes Primogems for the Wishes in the first place. Trees can be chopped down for wood to advance the battle pass level. Flowers can be gathered to be cooked and turned into food, so I can survive a boss fight that I need to complete in order to progress to the next page of the game guide, which rewards me with Primogems. I can then spend them in the hope of getting a character that, since it has an elemental power that I need, can help me advance my Adventure Rank. The result is an avatar-as-interface that modulates our instrumental relationship to the world.

Interactive Ideological Framing Apparatus

One of the earliest attempts to bring Althusser into game studies is Matt Garite's (2003) paper *The Ideology of Interactivity (or Video Games and the Taylorization of Leisure*). While Garite intervenes in a specific discourse during the time of the writing, the paper is an interesting attempt to bridge ideology critique and games via a "work of gaming—not merely the work of the player, but also the work that the video game performs in order to 'play' the player" (Garite, 2003, p. 2). Rather than being places of interactive freedom, Garite (2003, p. 2) argues that video games "lock players in a self-replicating, integrated circuit of instructions and commands. (...)" which echoes the wider "consumer ideology whereby, under the guise of freedom, discipline encodes its other." (Garite, 2003, p. 2)[18]

We can already see the interpretative matrix that can be deployed to understand *Genshin Impact:* the game, predicated on accumulation (of items, of currency, etc.), is full of interpellative demands that hail players to participate in its "inner game

[18] Two main criticisms that could be levied against Garite's argument should be mentioned here. First, by applying Althusser to the games as such, his overgeneralization fails to account for games that purposefully diminish the urgency of typical game demands in favor of contemplative, reflective, and other kinds of experiences (such as Proteus, Key & Kanaga, 2013). Secondly, his perspective falls prey to Althusser's totalizing view, in which ideology has no outside and cannot be escaped. This forecloses the discussion on, far from completely marginal, genres with different approaches to interactivity than those described by Garite (2003), ultimately limiting players' potential agency.

market"[19] (Hauer, 2023, p. 1). The free-roaming "travellers" are not unlike the Garite's individual consumers.

Garite's analysis is not only important due to its use of Althusser in the video game context, but it also helps us tie the progression of *Genshin Impact* with the larger concerns of video game interactivity and its effects. While the free-to-play model did not exist in its current form when Garite's study was published, it is precisely why it is interesting to interrogate his claims against the backdrop of the history of ideology he sketches. That is, the ideology of the digital economy.

Garite builds his interpellation interpretation on Lev Manovich's idea of "externalization and objectification of cognitive processes" (Garite, 2003, p. 4), which is emblematic of all interactive media. In a move critical of then-popular game system formalism, Garite and Manovich draw attention to the "pre-programmed (...) associations" (Manovich, 2001 in Garite, 2003, p. 4) that are enacted by interactive system like a game: the processes of "filling in, hypothesis formation, recall, identification" (Manovich, 2001 in Garite, 2003, p. 4) are already partially prestructured by an interactive object. While interactive media deploy traditional representations (of bodies, etc.), they also already contain mental structures. This echoes Vella's (2013) previously discussed work on enframing enacted by the game code.

The "amplification of physical gestures'' (Garite, 2003, p. 3) that is pleasurable in the form of repetitive interactive actions already presupposes affective activation. While this subsection mainly discusses the systemic nature of the progression systems, we can already see that the formal logic is inextricable from the aesthetic experience.

Garite draws attention to the double force of (Althusserian) ideology, which, at the same time, invents the conception of the free individual who is then made, under the guise of their freedom, to accept their subordination to the structuring principle. (Garite, 2003, p. 6).

[19] A term coined by the artist and researcher Filip Hauer (2023) that describes the particular logics of in-game accumulation, here represented by Primogems and a multitude of game materials, with interlocking, mutual transformations and exchanges.

It is via this assumed freedom that players approach games, which in turn subject them to tests, demands, and various ways this freedom is (willingly) circumscribed by a hidden code. (Garite, 2003, pp. 6-7) For Garite, this mirrors the workings of Althusserian ideology at large: “the interactive structure of video games produces that primary ideological effect whereby subjects are interpellated or called upon to (mis)recognize themselves as distinct, autonomous, freely acting individuals.” (Garite, 2003, p. 6).

This directly ties into the open-word promise. The progression system of *Genshin Impact* is doubly effective because it operates within the frame of the free open-world subjecthood.

Garite (2003, p. 7) argues that “video games grant players an unprecedented degree of freedom and control, while bombarding them with a relentless series of limits and demands”. It is fruitful to point out that, according to Garite, this mirrors the demands placed upon workers in a digital economy. He understands the interactive structure of the game world as a “series of information processing tasks”. (Garite, 2003, p. 9) As mentioned before, this is echoed by Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter (2009) and their discussion on player (immaterial) labour as well as Anable’s (2018) discussion on how mobile gaming (which *Genshin Impact* is a part of) blurs the boundary between work and free time:

> “Casual games function in the times and spaces between the myriad tasks we perform on digital devices: between domestic tasks and social obligations, and between solitary private activities and public/private social networks. Through mobile game apps, we can see how the blurred distinction between labor time and leisure time is both concretely and abstractly productive.” (Anable, 2018, p. 100)

A cursory look at various online tools that help players orient themselves in the interlocking systems of *Genshin Impact* seems like a case in point. For example, in order to level up weapons and artifacts that enhance characters’ abilities, players need certain items in gradually increasing quantities and of changing types. Community-developed tools notwithstanding, the game studio miHoYo itself presents players with the official Enhancement Progression Calculator on the official website to calculate all the necessary materials. The number of upgrade materials and their

interactions is too great for me to describe here. The information processing, thus, happens on two levels: that of the basic gameplay (exploration, combat, and all the progression systems reacting to it) and on the level of "meta-game" calculations of materials needed to successfully advance within the game's internal economy.[20]

To sum up: *Genshin Impact* uses the lure of an open-world free-roaming subject, then overlays this world with a web of interpellative demands. These not only structure our relationship to the virtual world (through the affordances of our avatar) but also echo processes of the broader economy and prevalent ideological frames. This structure, which appears free, yet subtly molds us, seems similar to the demands of contemporary neoliberalism. Like the ideology of *Genshin Impact,* neoliberalism (as understood by Bailes, 2019, pp. 13-25) emphasizes individual action, responsibility, and freedom, but at the same time is involved in our everyday lives, for example, through non-state bureaucratic systems. So on the one hand, there is a clear capitalist fantasy of accumulation within the basic structure of *Genshin Impact's* game systems. Via synaesthetic affect, it conjures simultaneously an emotional and instrumental relationship to its world and characters (always reducible to their statistics, value, and hierarchy within the semi-random Wish system). Bailes (2019, p. 23) talks about how games can help people reconcile contradictions within contemporary capitalism (like the demand to succeed individually, but without clear and fair pathway to it), because they act as unconscious fantasies that "organizes (...) [player's] desire, creating a sense of what should be fulfilling as what blocks that fulfillment." The fantasy of *Genshin Impact*'s avatar seems to interpellate within a similar social position as the ideology at large. But, it also makes its rules apparent, providing a way to, perhaps, symbolically reconcile these pressures when playing the game and becoming subjectivated through its avatar.

1.3.3 Interpellation and the Margin of Open-world Freedom

Let us now turn once again to Matt Garite's (2003) Althusserian critique of game interactivity. Garite's paper has been further worked upon by Robert Cassar (2013) in

[20] Similarly, in the context of casual games, Anable (2018, p. 100) writes: "Conceptualizing casual games as affective processes stresses the relationship between games as cybernetic systems and their role in larger interrelational systems of representation, labor, identity, play, and so on."

his study *Gramsci and Games*. In it, Cassar presents an overview of different approaches and contexts of video game ideology critique. He then argues that what is needed is a less deterministic conception of ideology, specifically mentioning Althusser, along with Marx, as proponents of a "rigid theoretical framework" that cannot sufficiently address the ideological struggle at the heart of popular media. (Cassar, 2013, p. 341) His perspective on interactive ideology is important, as it anticipates some shortcomings of Althusser's approach and attempts to alleviate them by bringing in other discourses.

Informed by Stuart Hall and Gramsci, Cassar understands ideology as always present within a "specific social relations" which always influences how the "meaning is (...) generated" as a social practice. (Cassar, 2013, p. 341) This understanding of ideology would, at first, seem to be at odds with Althusser's timeless ideology, which "has no history" (Althusser, 2014, p. 254) and, as such, transcends any sort of ephemeral context. Yet, as I will argue in this section, there is a way to reconcile Althusser and retain the fruitful concept of Interpellation while carving out space for a margin of freedom given to media recipients such as video game players.

It is important to mention that the ideology as understood by Althusser (and reproduced by Ideological State Apparatuses, ISAs) is not a question of representation or of concrete content of any given work (like a video game), but much more related to the structure of systemic subjectivation taking place within the milieu of any ISA. That is, in our case, the open world of G*enshin Impact*. In other words, the ideological question is related to the structure of the video game itself—the procedural, perceptual, and experiential structure I attempted to describe in the previous sections.

To discuss the question of agency in the face of ideology, we need to return to the idea of "free and voluntary" subjection that Althusser (2014, p. 205) puts forth. Cassar (2013, p. 336) states that "[according to Althusser] it is within ideology that man finds its Logos" and what is characteristic of ideology is "its ability to generate obviousness". (Cassar, 2013, p. 335) Ideology thus reproduces the conditions of production of the prevailing ideological order. The Althusserian subject does not think of itself as ideological, because ideology is precisely the relation to its surroundings it deems natural ("imaginary relation to reality" as per Stinati (2005, p. 142) in Cassar (2013, p. 336). Cassar (2013) understands Ideological effect as

composed of a) voluntarily choosing to be under ideology's effect; b) taking an externally imposed mental structure as natural and our own. This brings us back to Garite (2003) in Cassar (2013, p. 337): "The player who submits himself or herself freely to the mechanics of the game is very similar to the individual who willingly subjects himself or herself to Althusser's ideological framework."

Thus, the very algorithmic structure of a video game becomes both an allegory and a site of ideological effects. The lingering question then is, if and to what extent are players able to negotiate their subjugation? Cassar's (2013, p. 342) solution is to, drawing from Gramsci, reject the mass-manipulation hypothesis that is lurking behind Althusser's ahistorical ideology, contending that "there is still a certain level of consciousness about how meanings and values are disseminated throughout the society". (Cassar, 2013, p. 338) This "consciousness" of ideological effect is nevertheless not a coherent philosophical stance or, as I will argue, not even something that consumers of media objects can necessarily put into words.

In Cassar's interpretation, Gramsci is in sync with Althusser by emphasizing "regularity" (Cassar, 2013, 339) and "rhetorical repetition" (Brown, 2008, p. 73 in Cassar, 2013, p. 339) of ideological messaging, related to everyday practices as well as media objects and their content. If ideology is reproduced habitually through repetitive acts, Cassar (2013, p. 340) argues that it is necessarily related to meaning generation. In other words, it's a social practice (Cassar, 2013, p. 340).

A crucial aspect of the way ideology works (notably through mass media) is, in Cassar's (2013, p. 341) reading of Hall, the act of interpretation (articulation, disarticulation, and rearticulation in Hall's terms). What is being repeated is the structure of such interpretation (articulation) itself.

This is echoed by different approaches to Althusser such as that of (Richert et al., 2023)[21], where the interplay of interpellator and interpellated is built upon "expectations of recognition determined by knowledge, knowledge and experiences which are part of a system of ideas, belief, values and norms, in short an ideological

[21] In their work and other co-authored papers at the University of Montreal, Quebec, Bourassa & Richert (2022) develop a concept of counter-interpellation. While not without its flaws, their continuous interrogation of the amount of agency players have within interpellating game systems is indispensable.

field (…) recognition capacities which are built on an evolving background of normative requirements". (Richert et al., 2023, p. 7) Their work highlights the "cooperative" (Richert et al., 2023, p. 4) aspect of interpellation whereby ideological effect assumes model respondent, but the actual knowledge of the interpellated might differ, opening space for "counter-interpellation".

These perspectives help us situate Althusserian critique of ideology (and, hence, the critique of avatar ideology) within a broader set of social practices..

To put it differently and in Althusserian terms: interpellation in *Genshin Impact* is effective due to the broader social practice of open-world ideology, assumptions, and socially upheld preferred readings (or playings) and habitual orientations related to the shared understanding of the genre the game belongs to. As an open-world RPG, *Genshin Impact* follows a media-specific, historically contingent form. This form is related to both the expected desires of players and their cognitive orientations in-game.

What results is a habitual interpretative framework that understands the open world as a place for freedom, self-actualization, and empowerment. One that is not inherent to the formal properties of the game text itself[22] but related to the broader social practice of playing such a game. This is echoed in a way the community around *Genshin Impact* propagates ways of playing and relating to the game world—a clear example of how an ideology functions as a social practice; nevertheless, it is through official forums and its very own algorithmic structure that this social practice is mediated.

To sum up: Ideology is related to the very processes of self and subjectivation. If we view them as dependent on context-related social practices that direct them, we can wrest subjects out from the hold of totalizing ideology. Yes, the overarching ideological structure is not entirely contingent (the ideology of capitalism, after all, still rests on the basic categories of freely acting individuality); however, social practices still circumscribe its effects. The role of ideological critique would thus be to describe and shed light on these practices that enable the ideological effect of a

[22] With, arguably and ultimately, very limited freedom to do as one pleases in contrast to the physical world.

multitude of interpellating agents, a “lifting of misunderstanding to awareness” (Richert et al., 2023, p. 7).

1.3.4 Interpellation as a (Temporal) Habit: Daily Quests

Garite’s (2003) analysis brings into focus another aspect that is present in both video games and Althusser’s conception of ideology: habit and repetition. The repeated interactive elements of games “naturalize the relationship between player gestures and on-screen effects”. (Garite, 2003, p. 3). The seductive rhythm of game interaction becomes second nature, obfuscating its ideological effects—both the carefully constructed nature of the game experience (and player responses) and the latent structure related to wider social forces embedded within it.

As should be clear at this point, the repetition is not related only to the physical presses of the buttons and reactions to prompts. It is through these habits, using Garite’s (2003) concepts, “mental structure” (Manovich, 2001, as cited in Garite, 2003) is enacted and upended. By interacting with the avatar, we may feel we are embodying a smooth vehicle for players’ actions, while the game already includes prestructured forms of cognition and gameworld navigation.

When Garite mentions that “body is silently inscribed with and encoded by the command lines of the program,” (Garite, 2003, p. 8), he, once again, points towards the phenomenological, affective aspect of the interpellation—a continuous hailing of the game via its systems that is naturalized by continuous and changing flow of new prompts requiring player demands.

It is important to point out that Garite’s (2003) critical perspective, with which I align myself, takes note of habitual repetitions on various levels. This habituality includes the sudden shifts in the video game environment (a sudden appearance of an enemy, unexpected reward for stumbling upon a new region) as well as more stable rhythms structuring these smaller interactions.

In this section, I want to focus on the latter to bring into the fore the habitual aspect of interpellation that’s present in *Genshin Impact.* Namely, I want to deal with

temporally dependent progression systems, such as repeating quests, refreshing dungeons, and others.

Every Day, Multiple Times

While they represent a subset of mechanisms discussed in the previous section, the habitual and temporal structure is a demand of another kind: rather than structuring our orientation towards the gameworld as a whole, they also serve to bind players to the game object as such.

The temporal dimension of *Genshin Impact* is evident in the (albeit scarce) qualitative research as well. For example, Woods (2022), drawing from in-depth interviews with players, draws attention to "temporal economy" (Woods, 2022, p. 1083) of the interplay between game and everyday lives, exploring "interworkings of time, money and code under conditions of late capitalism. (Woods, 2022, p. 1078) *Genshin Impact* is seen as deeply related to temporal investments, habitual "grind" (Woods, 2022, p. 1085), a repetitive accumulation of resources to offset the need to invest money into randomized Wishes.[23]

I want to focus on a slightly different temporal dimension here, one that is lurking behind the questions of player time investment: the habitual, temporal ordering of the gameplay itself. To that end, I will discuss various daily quests (in gamer vocabulary called dailies) and other time-dependent activities players are asked to perform, and arguably have to perform in order to play the game most efficiently.

As of September 2025, *Genshin Impact* includes the following time-dependent tasks/systems:

- Daily check-in (via website or an app) with concrete rewards for each consecutive check-in in a given month.

[23] Wood's (2022) study is notable for two reasons. It represents an empirical account of *Genshin Impact* gameplay, making it a fruitful addition to the slowly growing body of literature related to free-to-play gacha titles. Secondly, it heavily draws attention to the interplay of the game and "structural frame" (Woods, 2002, p. 1077) extending beyond it: "The pervasiveness of mobile games means that the logics governing the ways in which players engage with gacha games are not distinct from, but are embedded within, their daily lives." (Woods, 2022, p. 1080)

- Battle-pass[24], seasonal (time-limited) progression system. Rewards players with level points after completing specific daily, weekly, or season-long challenges. This includes tasks such as “Cook 20 meals” or “Mine 20 materials.”
- Daily semi-random quests, with awards after completing each of them. A special reward is obtained after completing four of them each day.
- Daily semi-random reputation quests (increasing players’ standing with one out of several in-game factions/cities and rewarding them in the process)
- Stellar reunion (special progression for returning players with daily check-in and time-limited tasks)
- Expeditions (players can “dispatch” one or more of their characters via a single UI screen, and after a timer (in order of hours) finishes, collect rewards)
- Dungeons (specific game challenges), which change depending on the day of the week
- Original resin system (collecting some rewards from world bosses and other encounters requires players to spend “original resin” items, usually in batches of 40. The resin is capped at 160 at a time and replenishes at midnight—that is, unless a special item is used to restore a portion of it
- Time-limited quests/challenges (usually coincide with the launch of a new season/update and close after a given time).
- Extra events and activities on the game website and community forums. These daily and often seasonal activities reward players with items to be used on the discussion boards and sometimes with materials and currency for the game itself.

The pure progression-based interpellation makes demands mostly at the time of playing. The one tied with these temporally dependent systems extends its reach into everyday life. In order to play the game effectively, to make the most out of their time in Teyvat, players are reminded to take at least part of those systems into account. They seem to be designed in a way that requires keeping multiple game timers in mind.

[24] An industry term and a typical free-to-play monetisation strategy. Battle passes are usually divided into free and premium tiers, with the premium tier being purchasable with premium currency. Usually, this means that the premium tier is practically accessible only by spending real money.

For example:

After waking up, I think about what leisure activities I might undertake today. Genshin Impact immediately makes one demand: to complete four daily quests, which will reward me with some Primogems that I can use to try to obtain new characters. I therefore know I should log in to the game at some point. While I brush my teeth, I pull up my phone and do a quick check-in on the official website so I can get some healing items. During my tram ride to work, I don't have enough time to complete any daily quests, but I can check my expeditions. Earlier, I set the timer to eight hours and sent my heroes out before I went to sleep, so now they are ready to go again. They brought me some mining materials I needed to enhance my weapons and cooking ingredients, which I need to complete the meals. Those meals cooked will count towards my battle pass. Moreover, it's Wednesday, which means that the dungeon that drops the one rare item I need for leveling up my beloved hero is open.



Fig. 8: Expeditions in Genshin Impact.

Rhythmic Interpellation

These temporally dependent systems are emblematic of the habitual dimension of Althusserian interpellation. The player is constituted in relationship to the gameworld of *Genshin Impact* through the means of economic intelligibility, and in order to advance in the game, has to take the accumulation of currencies/levels/items into account. What temporally dependent systems then do is they leverage this initial

demand for perpetual improvement. The world of *Genshin Impact* is constituted as instrumental, then reinterpreted through the instrumental progression system and, at last, ties these systems into habitual demands of daily/weekly/seasonal and other rhythms.

This rhythmic aspect of *Genshin Impact* gameplay becomes more pronounced when we turn our attention to the player's body.

As per Apperley (2011, p. 20), “bodies are where everyday life interfaces with the games screen.” In this work, he draws on Lefebvre’s concept of “rhythmanalysis”, where “everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time, and an expenditure of energy, there is rhythm.”. (Apperley, 2011, p. 19). Lefebvre analyzed everyday life and mundane activities, our interactions. Apperley deploys his perspective onto a study of what he calls “situated gaming” (Apperley, 2011, p. 54), where playing a game becomes an “exercise of practice”, a “localized enactment of the game” (Apperley, 2011, p. 54) that always exceeds any imposed cybernetic control over the player. Two concepts of “eurythmia and arrhythmia” are key for Apperley, 2011 (p. 39) which result from constance or dissonance, respectively, between a rhythm of digital games and rhythms of the “gaming body” (Apperley, 2011, p. 39) and/or the “social and cultural demands that dominate the location of play.” (Apperley, 2011, p. 40) He defines Eurythmia and arrhythmia in the following way:

> The relationships within and between linear and cyclical rhythms are complex; the interactions often slip into unstable states, or ‘arrhythmia’, where one rhythm starts to dominate, or interfere with, the other. (…) Eurhythmia is a state where multiple rhythms are integrated and enmeshed in a larger rhythm. In the case of digital games, eurhythmia occurs when [the] rhythm of the individual game and the rhythm of the situated ecology are compatible and complementary. (Apperley, 2011, p. 39)

This leads him to the conclusion that “[f]or the play of a particular game to take place, there must be a congruence, or eurhythmia, between the digital game’s rhythm and the everyday rhythm in the location of play. (Apperley, 2011, p. 40) Notably, these remarks were written in 2010 as part of a broader research project that involved embedded fieldwork in cyber cafés in Australia and Venezuela. Since then, we have seen a dramatic shift in the “polyrhythmic assemblage” that play is a part of. This was

enabled by both the massive adoption of smartphones with ubiquitous and reliable internet connections and a subsequent evolution of gameplay mechanics and business models.

As described in the previous section, *Genshin Impact* is a game that utilizes various rhythms (kinds of polyrhythm, according to Apperley, 2010, p. 19). This does not necessarily make it unique—a similar combination of time-based incentives (daily quests, refreshing challenges, currency-based time restrictions, expeditions, etc.) is a routine part of a whole free-to-play, gacha genre. Similar devices are deployed by games such as *Umamusume: Pretty Derby* (Cyagames, 2021)*, Wuthering Waves* (Kuro Games, 2024), or *Infinity Nikki* (InFold Games, 2024).

Crucially, all of these titles, including *Genshin Impact,* are both mobile and desktop games that instantly synchronize players' progress across different devices. This means that while Apperley (2010) describes different kinds of rhythmic frictions between the demands of a game (such as *World of Warcraft*) and players' everyday life involving switching locations (and, therefore, hardware and internet access), today's gaming body is much more mobile. As a result, there are many more opportunities for "congruence, or eurythmia" (Apperley, 2010, p. 40) necessary for play to arise—especially in the everyday life of a cognitive capitalism worker, where quickly opening a mobile game is much less problematic than during a shift on an assembly line. And even then, the always-on nature of these free-to-play economies enables game rhythms to seamlessly fit into pockets of break time, waiting time, or leisure time. Or, as Anable (2018, p. 73) says in the context of casual games: "[they] speak explicitly to labor and efficiency and to contemporary rhythms of work and play. The small games we play in between other tasks have particular rhythms and temporalities that are bound up with the blurring distinction between work and play in contemporary culture."

In a sense, games like *Genshin Impact* are emblematic of the distorted social time at large, where nearly any moment can be used to progress along the systems of in-game accumulation and play is no longer relegated to the clearly defined leisure activity: instead, it becomes a diffuse activity, with multiple in-game ticking timers on the back of our mind, making us act in accordance with them in time by pulling up a phone that we always have with us.

This temporality of perpetually updating background "tasks" that can (and will) require our attention is emblematic of what Chun (2017, p. 3) calls "crisis time". The idea that the immediacy of digital media represents a different temporal regime where our communication devices might contain something crucial at every moment is echoed in *Genshin Impact*'s demands on our low-level attention. While focused on other tasks, *Genshin Impact* interpellates us even outside of the game: as subjects of Tetyat as well as subjects of the critical temporal regime.

Of special interest for the present study is a premium virtual item called *Blessing of the Welkin Moon*, which is emblematic of the temporal structure of the game economy, in very direct terms. As of writing, Blessing of the Welkin Moon costs 149 CZK per month. Upon purchasing it, players are rewarded with 300 Genesis Crystals (convertible to other currencies and used to purchase premium items) and then with 90 primogems (main currency used for buying Wishes and other premium items) after logging into the game every day for 30 days. If a player fails to log in, they will not receive any materials. *Blessing of the Welkin Moon* thus effectively represents a paid incentive for daily play, presumably making some buyers restructure their playing schedule to accommodate it and get the most out of its offering.

To make the best use of what the game has to offer and/or play optimally, it is inevitable to play *Genshin Impact* habitually, mindful of the many metaphorical "clocks" ticking in the game and their durations, and routinely come back to complete given tasks. A double bind of ideology makes itself apparent: at first, it constitutes subjects as economic actors and then subjugates them to arbitrary rules to fulfill their role.

Habitual Avatars

What, then, is the avatar's role in such a situation? There is definitely a part of *Genshin Impact*'s gameplay where the virtual body plays a less significant role, such as in expeditions, which occur through a user interface screen. Yet they are also part of the avatar-as-interface: characters dispatched on an expedition cannot be used for the duration of the expedition in-game, and to access the expedition screen, the player must reach a specific NPC in main game hubs/cities. So, even the rhythm of the expeditions, seemingly disconnected from the broader gameplay, necessarily involves us embodying a digital body—if we want to keep our expeditions running as smoothly as possible, we have to plan our virtual journeys accordingly. Avatar, thus,

becomes once again a focal point through which we are tethered to this temporal regime. A channel through which this ideology makes itself felt and through which we react to it.

The multiplicity of gameplay rhythms coalesce in the figure of the avatar, whose movements across the colorful world are conditioned by the many ticking clocks that we must take into account.

If per Jørgensen (2013) gameworld is an interface that is always a representation "designed with particular gameplay in mind and characterized by game-system information that enables meaningful player interaction" (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 1), it would therefore be tempting to call many temporal, rhythmic breaks of the desired flow of *Genshin Impact* gameplay, as flawed—that the incessant ticking of time-limited systems breaks supposed immersion. Yet, what Jørgensen (2013) points out is that there is, in fact, no immersion at all—we are always aware that we are part of a fictional world, where things don't have to be fictionally coherent for us to make sense of them. Jørgensen discusses *Diablo*, *Assassin's Creed,* and many other games that combine fictionally coherent and incoherent information, such as quest marks, highlights, and such. According to her, asking if the exclamation mark above the character's head, or, in our case, the Wish system with its monetization layer, breaks immersion, misses the point: "the gameworld is (...) an environment that connects the player with the game system." (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 3) Gameworld and its properties (including geography, graphics and, well, anything) is then not just a representational layer grafted onto a game system guided by algorithms: they form a tight bond—between the "game-system information" (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 3) and the "mediated space" (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 67)—where "interface of digital games must also be seen as content". (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 10)[25]

[25] Jørgensen (2013) elaborates that, despite how immersion is used, players are not absorbed into a game, forgetting its mediatic specificities and its interface. On the contrary, "interface is content" (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 108) precisely because playing the game means interacting with the interface of the game across three axes described by Jørgensen (2013, p. 143): integrated / superimposed (in-world objects, overlay UI), emphatic or ecological (highlighted items on a ground/natural part of the environment), fictional / ludic (related to game fiction, unrelated and pragmatic). The game world is not something we access via an interface—the whole gameworld is an interface.

From this perspective, the interface of *Genshin Impact* is not just a graphical UI, its menus, and progression bars; it's the whole of the gameplay experience, including the physical model, the 3D landscape, the animations, as well as accompanying gameplay rhythms. As I argue throughout this thesis, it is the avatar(-as-interface) that has a privileged position within the particular *gameworld* of *Genshin Impact*.

If we understand the (gameworld) interface as a "mediating layer between player and game system" (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 20), it provides us with a way to connect the particular workings of a gameworld with an ideology that is both representational & practice-based. According to Althusser, ideology is effectuated through habits and everyday situations and is closely tied to spontaneity (Althusser, 2014, p. 258), or the reflexive relationship we create with our surroundings, which shapes our subjectivity. What is crucial for this ideological outlook is naturalization: a process by which dominant forms of relating are reproduced through institutions, culture, society, and the economy. Jacob et al. (2008 as cited in Jørgensen, 2013, p. 20) notes that "virtual environment (…) frames the interaction so that the player can apply knowledge gained from his encounters with other gameworlds as well as within the physical world"; this echoes the importance of convention when interacting with virtual worlds—Jørgensen (2013) herself notes how players are routinely addressed by the game interface directly, but are so used to it as the paradigm of player-game interaction that they perceive it as natural. This convention might be one of the pathways ideology enters our lives: when we sit down to control our character in *Genshin Impact*, we are perhaps already attuned to the ways it will construct its interface (based on our experience with similar open-world games) and to the mental models its interface provides (including temporal demands, monetization mechanics, etc.).

While Jørgensen's insights into the working of gameworlds are invaluable, her study continually brings up terms like "meaningful" or "easy to understand" when it comes to the functioning of the interface. Yet, these descriptors are neither universal nor neutral, nor even necessarily desirable from the point of view of the gamemakers. It is a well-known aspect of free-to-play games that their interfaces are very cluttered, bordering on chaotic ([razor01707], 2023), bombarding players with many virtual currencies, systems, items, and tasks—as the previous analysis of *Genshin Impact* attests.

What is “meaningful” is then highly volatile. The game interface of *Genshin Impact* is arguably not easy to use (if by use we mean comprehend and have significant agency in), and one could argue that this is precisely the (affective) point: a strain needed by players to grasp the interface and all the information fully is so high that many simply give up trying to comprehend it all. This is especially critical in the case of a game that utilizes a well-known, conventional genre, such as the open-world RPG. In the face of overwhelming systems, we might retreat into the convention that the game seemingly offers, while obscuring the machinations of state-of-the-art ideological devices aimed at extracting surplus value (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, p. 78) as a part of “futuristic accumulation” (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, p. 126) from the players.

Jørgensen’s (2013) work has far-reaching implications for ideology critique. It gives us a vocabulary to talk about the effects of a given game in concrete terms; it highlights the formal properties of player experience without resorting to general conclusions about game ideological effects. As Jørgensen states, the game interface operates through “convention” (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 112) and “frames” (Goffman, 1974, as cited in Jørgensen, 2013, p. 113), which lead players’ interpretation of the communicative (or, rather, metacommunicative) situation. Jørgensen’s analysis helps us to situate the ideological effects of games on the level of interface motions, the frames and conventions that we are led to understand as media-specific, which guide our experience of the given game.

If something is missing from Jørgensen’s (2013) account of gameworld interfaces, it is the affective context. Repeatedly, she makes a distinction between “interaction” and “ornamental” features and objects. (Jørgensen, 2013, pp. 82, 43, 75, 79, 80, 145, 147, 159, 161, 82) On the grounds of affect theory outlined in chapter 2 of this thesis, I find it insufficiently flattening. From a functional standpoint, that might be true, but even these ornamental properties do contribute to the more or less diffuse, affective atmosphere of the game and guide our interaction. The way these ornamental properties frame interaction surrounding the “interactive” elements and how they contribute to the “worldness” (Klastrup, 2003, 2009, 2010, as cited in Jørgensen, 2013, p. 55) of the situation we find ourselves in is significant. For example, in *Genshin Impact*, many non-interactable elements of the lush world of Teyvat serve to entice us as part of the overall aesthetic experience.

Ideology, for Althusser, operates on the level of habit, belonging not necessarily to the utterances or semiotic content of a given interpellation, but enacted and sustained by everyday life. (Althusser, 2014, p. 263) Following this, we can conclude that *Genshin Impact,* precisely by utilizing temporal systems that are enmeshed via the avatar, binds players to its gameworld. Its gameworld follows the logic of ideology, which becomes naturalized via repeated actions that must become part of the rubric of everyday motions.[26] This is intensified by the fact that *Genshin Impact* is playable on both desktop and mobile, making it much easier to accommodate into everyday rhythms.

At the same time, the cognitive load represented by *Genshin Impact* poses a seeming paradox. If the point of habit is that it is enacted with much conscious thought, the load of many overlapping temporal systems is far from it. However, as I had argued, it is precisely the amount of temporal organizing that needs to be undertaken by the players that precludes any reflection on their part, as there is always some "clock" ticking, hidden under the icon of *Genshin Impact* on their home screen.

The player, then, is the subject that is constituted both by the very fact of being hailed/interpellated by the game system (as a singular person being addressed by the interactive interface and diegesis) as well as the temporal rhythms that, if unreflected, structure their everyday life in accordance with pre-programmed routines of the game.

The pre-programmed adjective is not intended to mean that the player is necessarily enslaved by the game system. I want to draw attention to the deliberate temporal ordering that players either undertake or are heavily incentivized to undertake to play effectively. These structuring principles are beholden to a logic of gamemakers seeking to increase their rate of profit and the more structural logic of private accumulation and instrumentalization.[27]

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[26] The way *Genshin Impact* gameplay permeates day-to-day decisions is evident in the aforementioned Woods (2022), both in interviews with players and in the author's conclusions.

[27] The habitual dimension is not only echoed by Althusser (2014) and subsequent researchers (Garite, 2003 ; Keever, 2022), but also by those perspectives on games that draw on phenomenology (Keogh, 2018). I discuss them along with the influential concept of video game dressage in the next chapter. Suffice to say that the naturalization inherent to

Crisis Times

Althusserian intervention by Keever (2022) is indispensable as it places Althusser in conversation with contemporary posthumanist discourse, decentering the privileged position of a unitary (and sometimes essentialised) human subject.

Here, I want to draw focus on Keever's (2022) interrogation of the work of media theorist Wendy Chun, which I mentioned previously. The crux of Chun's ideological critique is the question of habit, which is employed by new media (incl. video games). Crucially, this habit operates by establishing the temporality of "crisis" (Keever 2022, p. 8). Crisis interrupts our temporal experience to make us "use" the media object: to make decisions in response to the stimuli which new media provide" (Keever, 2022, p. 8).

As I have argued elsewhere (Trhoň & Hauer, 2023), the interplay of critical time and slow time[28] is a constituting factor of the habitually upended temporal regime at play in *Genshin Impact.* I mention both Chun and this previously published paper to draw attention to various temporal scales on which the ideology operates. The daily, weekly, and seasonal rhythms of in-game accumulation are complemented by minutiae encounters that are made meaningful via the interplay of both. When I fight a boss-creature, Anemo Hypostatis, I am interpellated by the twofold interactive structure of the game. I have to react as a sovereign actor to the interactive demands of the fight (avoid projectiles), but my fight and its stakes are already embedded within the progression systems (completing a battle pass challenge, advancing my in-game guide, obtaining materials, and also spending my temporally dependent original resin to maximize my daily gameplay output).

Through this idea of action within the game systems (on various levels), we are being interpellated by the subject-forming function. This might explain how the feeling of control when playing a game can coexist with the apparent lack of it when examining

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Althusser's ideology is at play in dressage as well, making the letter a fruitful extension of the former.

[28] In my previous joint paper (Trhoň & Hauer, 2023), we have examined the temporal structure of *Elden Ring* and *Genshin Impact*, concluding that they arise from the interplay of fast time (akin to Chun's crisis), like combat (requiring fast responses), and the overarching slow time of in-game accumulation (of experience as well as currency). We then propose a concept of abstract time to draw attention to the specific temporal ordering of a given gameworld, ultimately tying both open world fantasies to the self-improvement logic of neoliberalism.

the limited spaces of video game worlds up close. Because a crisis asks us to act and then offers us pleasurable feedback right away, the sense of subjectively perceived agency is heightened. The conclusion Keever (2022) and Garite (2003) both arrive at via different discursive methods is similar: that agency is a product of concrete ideology. One, that is enacted via interpellation.

Keever (2022) ties the formation of the player subject to the formal structure of the gameworld. Informed by certain philosophies critical of cybernetics[29], he sees the ideology as operating on the level of code: "The player is created by being subjected to this computational, calculable, economic grid of intelligibility: it is the material interface by which the player is "read" and by which they respond—which really means that this interface is the material practice which forms the player as a player-subject." (Keever, 2022)

I mention this paper as it not only further develops some themes already mentioned by Garite (2003), but is also a part of a longer history of Althusserian game studies interventions. What is important is that it takes into account procedural interpellation and the more esoteric parts of Althusser's famous essay. The parts where Althusser is concerned with the very concept of the self as imbricated in the ideological web of interpellations provide us with a conceptual bridge to the next section dedicated to selfhood.

1.3.5 Avatar Affective Capital

I don't claim to be the first to point out the contested nature of the avatar, or even to be the first to conclude that it is a piece of gaming interface where multiple forces and perspectives meet. Van Ryn et al (2019, p. 12) conclude that "the avatar—at once a representational, affective and gestural agent for the players—is shown to be a key

[29] Namely, the work of philosopher Julian Stallabras. The Stallabras' concept of "universal reduction" points towards a structure-level ideology of "universal abstraction" enacted by the game code. When we play the game and interact with its interface and move our bodies accordingly, we feel the straightforward effects that the interactive system presents us on a screen. This "capture" via rational and rigid game code works at all times, "even if [players] play as mindlessly as possible" (Keever, 2022). Keever sums up: "to engage with a computer is to engage with an ontology of calculability unavoidably." (Keever, 2022) This perspective is potent, but it fails to account for the obvious differences in third-person avatar-based games like *Genshin Impact* and, for instance, incremental games like *Cookie Clicker* (Dashnet, 2013), as well as their respective conditions of intelligibility that guide this "capture".

site of the circulation and exchange of value between player/customers and platforms." In their paper, they built upon the "affective investment" players make in "affective economies" in their avatars. While they focus on multiplayer *Team Fortress 2* (describing how players of this game accumulate "avatar capital"), their perspective can be applied to single-player games as well. While the "reputational hierarchy" (van Ryn et al., 2019, p. 2) is not as prominent in gacha games like *Genshin Impact*, many players report that collecting characters is an important part of the game's allure. In *Team Fortress 2*, we adorn our character to display it for others in the multiplayer matches (and the Steam platform itself) to see; in *Genshin Impact*, we are affectively invested in our avatar as well. Also, the community aspect should not be discarded: it is beyond the confines of the present study to interrogate this thoroughly, but the fact that Genshin Impact is an always-online video game, the knowledge that we play at the same time as many other players are striving to finish their own collection, might provide some sense of "reputational hierarchy" as well. This is further enhanced by official forums of the game, where players are encouraged to share their pulls and calculate currencies/materials needed to advance their desired hero characters. While what "quantifies their [player's] experience of affect" in the case of *Team Fortress 2* is the Steam platform, in G*enshin Impact,* it is the game itself. We can understand similar games more like platforms on their own rather than singular gaming artifacts.[30]

Crucially, van Ryn et al. (2019) ground their analysis by discussing the affective dimension of play. They understand affect as "pre-cognitive forces or intensities that bring together bodies and worlds" (Siedworth and Gregg, 2010, as cited in van Ryn et al., p. 3), including "attention to the bodily gestures of play, the sensory interfaces of gaming systems" and player's attachment to avatars (van Ryn et al., 2019, p. 3). This involves caring for our avatars, racing kinaesthetically to different movement and attention regimes (resulting from our avatar modulation) and that "relationship between the player and the game is structured by the flow of affective intensities between the on-screen body of the avatar and the body of the player." (Frow, 2012, p. 366 as cited in van Ryn et al., 2019, p. 3). They plainly understand this "maintenance of affect" as a "structuring principle" (van Ryn et al., 2019, p. 3) of the virtual economy of the Steam platform. This highlights how enmeshed the avatar as an interface is within the ideologies of virtual worlds.

[30] For further discussion on the "behavioral capital," see Janoščík (2023).

In a sense, it is through the avatar that economic and social, affective and reflective, gameplay and aesthetic coalesce—it is "a site through which intensities of affect are experienced" (van Ryn et al., 2019, p. 8). It is thus a focus of players' "affective investment, a site of bodily labour and a source of value for gaming platforms". (van Ryn et al., 2019, p. 8) This is as true of *Team Fortress 2* as of *Genshin Impact* and, for that matter, to any game that features avatar customization, since, due to the networked nature of contemporary gaming, potentially any game avatar can be easily shared with the game community to tap into the virtual social "relational hierarchy".

A crucial concept that van Ryn et al. (2019) draw from van Ryn (2013) is "gestural economy," which trains players in particular "bodily routines, forms of attention and disciplines", something that Apperley (2010, p. 48) and Keogh (2018, p. 14) call dressage after Henri Lefebvre. These timings, patterns, movements, and positions are understood as being deeply embedded within a given gestural economy, an economy to which we must align our play. Van Ryn et al. (2019, p. 8) define gestural economy as "the quality of player attention, focus and movement [that] differs from [in-game] class to class [of the game avatar]. While different characters in *Genshin Impact* have different gameplay roles (due to their affiliation with different elements), they also provide different representational experiences—with varying types of movement that elicit different affective responses, they modulate the gestural economy in subtle ways, based on their gender presentation and other factors. Gestural economy describes both the way we are required to adapt our movements in accordance with the selected class (the micro-level), but also how these very movements contribute to the broader affective investment into the given character (or, in our case, composition of characters in a party): "Avatars are both the object of players' dressage, a tool through which players are disciplined in appropriate forms of player, and the apparatus of platforms' affections." (van Ryn et al., 2019, p. 9)

In *Genshin Impact*, this is most pronounced in differences in how various characters move, fight, traverse the world, and which abilities they have at their disposal. While they do have significant impact on gameplay due to the aforementioned need to create synergistic party of characters of different elements, in regards to "gestural economies" what is at least similarly important is the way they are animated, the rhythm of gameplay they lend themselves into, affective charge they bring, and, in some cases, even the mode of traversal (and therefore framing) of the gameworld.

Each character has a base moveset and at least three abilities: basic attack (ranged or close-range), a less powerful “elemental skill” with a cooldown, and an “elemental burst” that’s usually the most potent ability and that needs to be charged in combat. There are additional gradations (e., some ranged attacks can be aimed, every attack can be charged for additional elemental effect or damage, etc.), and for players willing to invest substantial real-life money, different outfits can be equipped.

These different modulations can be equated with Kalmanlehto (2023, p. 8) calls “agency as aesthetics of temporality” that is informed by research into rhythms and “patterns of attention” drawing from theorists of embodied, processual aesthetic experience (that is tied with doing and not “just” appreciating): “Every action by a player or a computer that changes the state of the game produces new affordances that require new decisions. This results in a rhythmic succession of actions and their consequences.” (Kalmanlehto, 2023, p. 8) This means that “different forms of agencies have different rhythms, which produce different moods, emotions, and bodily sensations.” (Kalmanlehto, 2023, p. 8) He studies the rhythmic gameplay of *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2023), known to lead players into a certain rhythm of perceiving the visual cues that the enemy is about to attack, and responding (dodging, attacking) adequately. In *Genshin Impact*, these “microlevel rhythms” (Kalmanlehto, p. 9) of players’ actions form a feedback loop with gestural economy. And since rhythm “frames a distinct agential posture” (Kalmanlehto, 2023, p. 10), these are necessarily tied to the way we experience the world of *Genshin Impact*. In other words, rhythm is constitutive of both agential and affective states of the player through interacting with the gameworld interface—one that is tied to the overarching ideological, extractive structure.

Kalmanlehto (2023, p. 12) does not equate rhythm strictly with game actions, but rather with the “changing state of the game,” expressed as the “agential posture” players adopt during play. Rhythm becomes “the organizing principle of the 'language' of the game itself”. (Kalmanlehto, 2023, p. 9) This gives us vocabulary not only to describe a particular cognitive state that *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022) or *Armored Core* (FromSoftware, 2023) invokes in us, but also how the interplay of various characters that is central to *Genshin Impact*’s (MiHoYo, 2023) gameplay operates. According to Kalmanlehto (2023, p. 13), rhythms in *Elden Ring* are always

layered, with exploration being interspersed by leveling up characters and fighting enemies: the same is true for *Genshin Impact*.

There is a perceptible rhythmic difference in my orientation towards the gameworld when I traverse it and fight, embodying the initial traveller character equipped with a sword, in contrast to Mavuika, who can conjure up a fantastical motorcycle to traverse the land of Tetyat at speed. A party consisting of Diona and Amber has different rhythm (and, thus, agential posture towards the world) than the one with Lisa and Ningguang: In the first one, I am invited to charge my attacks to apply elements and then use the other character to invoke a special elemental reaction ("melt" occurs when fire and ice meet), while in the second it is about using Nigguang's "Geo" elemental power to create a wall that turns passing electric projectiles from Lisa into a shards that I can pick up to damage foes around me continuously. Nigguang can also mine much faster (due to her affinity with earth), which further alters the rhythm of approaching the *Genshin Impact*'s landscape. Each of the characters has different pleasurable animations and embodies different archetypes, elicits different sounds. This follows the finding by Kalmanlehto (2023, p. 5) that "digital games blur the boundary between process and object aesthetics," that is, between narrative/fictional elements and gameplay features.[31]

Kalmanlehto (2023, p. 15) concludes that "rhythm opens a way to understand the affective and bodily sense of self, unconscious styles and habits instead of autobiographical self-fashioning". *Genshin Impact* is, nevertheless, a different form of a video game than premium *Elden Ring*: more akin to a platform[32] such as Steam, with its economy which "reframes the exploration of identity into an expression of gamer identity through social and economic capital." (van Ryn, 2019, p. 10) *Genshin Impact*

[31] There are numerous critical approaches to the anime-like aesthetics of *Genshin Impact*. The cuteness at play can be viewed through the lens of the affect it brings (Ireland & Kronic, 2024) or as a sign of the changing structure of cultural consumption. Azuma (2009) examines how anime characters become decoupled from the context of their originating narrative by fans. He understands this as a post-modern way of relating to cultural production: the adherence to grand narratives (which *Genshin Impact* contains in the form of still-unconcluded "archon" quests) is secondary to the diffuse affective bond with the setting and characters we consume through inhabiting the cute avatars and the world.

[32] Even the developer's own branding of the "Hoyoverse" (miHoYo, 2023) as a unified metaplatform for player participation highlights this aspect—the game itself often directs players' attention to the community website, including sub-games and game rewards for using the available tools that are embedded within the social and economic capital of the user base.

can then be viewed as forming an expression economy on the given platform, one that is tied to the minutiae of players' actions, which alter the game rhythm and are tied to the economic structure of the free-to-play model.

This coupling of affect and marxist critique is echoed for example in Kordela's (2023, p. 6) account of "affective exploitation" by which she means "simultaneous amplification and appropriation of transindividual affective capacities by capital", where it is the human's capacity for self-actualisation through labour (and, in her Spinoza-influenced reading of Marx, thus their becoming as subjects as a part of relational web) that is being appropriated by capital(ism), a process that per Kordela (2023, p. 6) "reaches its apogee in today's informatized capitalism", including digital games. Her argument echoes the one I already mentioned by Garite (2003), as "maximum economicoaffective exploitation succeeds because we play with the same materials during our so-called leisure time that we use during our so-called work time." (Kordela, 2023, p. 7) Our "surplus labour" (Kordela, 2023, p. 7) can be captured thanks to the information processing that valorizes the digital platform/products even though we are not engaging with them directly as wage workers: it is reminiscent of Garite's (2003) thoughts regarding the "Taylorization of leisure" when describing the blurring of games and work, the one Annable (2018, p. 80) calls "mobile, liminal, and affective temporalities of labor" and Kunzelman (2022, p. 55) describes as games allowing to rehearse "potential labour" (p. 55).

Playing *Genshin Impact* thus constructs both us as subjects of capitalist relations to our surroundings (through accumulation and instrumentality), but affectively ties us to its platform to both sell us paid addons and/or include data generated by our gameplay to optimize the game further and capitalize on it.

1.3.6 Interpellation From the Void (Through the Avatar)

So far, I have mostly equated interpellation with either procedural systems (progression) or temporal ordering (habitual daily quests). But what is already present in Garite (2003) and further developed by other researchers applying Althusser to games (like Keever, 2022)[33] is the focus on more fundamental building

[33] While this study is indebted to Keever (2022), his reintroduction of Althusser into games studies is not without issues. His discussion on current literature dealing with player agency is

blocks of the game experience. This includes the notions of the selfhood mediated by the digital game.

In order to tie interpellation to avatar, it is important to examine the basic structure of the game experience, one that cannot be satisfyingly reduced to procedural mechanics.[34]

Since the focus of my study is on virtual embodiment, it is important to highlight where interpellation meets the avatar. Let us then return to the basic typology of perspectives on avatarhood by Klevjer (2023). We can then map different interpellative regimes at play in *Genshin Impact* onto different avatarhood types in order to interrogate the multiplicity of interpellations channeled through the avatar.

Klevjer (2023, p. 2) distinguishes between five types of avatarhood:

- social (self-presentation, avatar is a persona)
- corporeal (perceptual, avatar is a virtual body)
- ludic (formal, avatar is a game piece)
- mimetic (representation and narrative, avatar is a character)
- aesthetic (experience and reflection, avatar is a project)

We can understand these not only as theoretical perspectives, but as distinct functions of the avatar as a player's proxy on a screen. These functions may coexist, intersect, and support one another. While most of the following analysis is focused on corporeal avatarhood with intersections to the ludic one, the weight of the others should not be discredited. Therefore, at the end of this section, I will briefly discuss possible ways even the aesthetic, social, and mimetic avatarhoods align with the ideological aspects of *Genshin Impact* and perhaps contain a possibility to subvert the hold of the interpellative structure.

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limited, and his paper cannot escape the tautological pitfalls of Althusserian ideology, seemingly foreclosing any kind of subversive game approaches.

[34]This distinction is more functional than definitional. By procedural mechanics, I mean those perceived by the players as such, in an obvious way: like the leveling up mechanic or the fact that a flower gathered from a hilltop is a cooking resource. Of course, the ways the video game experience is ordered, from the camera perspective to the animations, are always procedural to some extent, as algorithmic operations are always involved.

Klejver (2023) is very clear about his position, which I subscribe to throughout this work, that an avatar is not the graphical or even three-dimensional user representation, but necessarily a device of the self, situated within a game-world: "avatarial self—the subjective phenomenon of acting and experiencing as an avatar". (Klevjer, 2023, p. 1) Avatarhood, understood this way, is not just an extension of agency, a question of acting upon through our proxy, but an extension of selfhood—a feedback loop between us and the character on the screen.

Avatar is thus to a large extent related to experience and perception: me-as-avatar has a capacity to mediate "experiential selfhood", meaning a proxy relationship between the virtual world and ourselves. Klevjer (2023, p. 3) puts a strong emphasis on the ownership of avatar-based experience: "via our avatarial selves (...) we can become able to relate to a computer-generated environment as *our* environment, our natural habitat, our 'world'."

In this perspective, human existence, either in the virtual or "real" world, is not an a priori condition. The environment is inhabited by our cognition, which reformats it in a way that it appears as our own. The mediated nature of such a process means it is far from neutral and natural. It can be understood as a site of *ideology* which works by limiting and restructuring the very conditions of the experience that gives rise to a selfhood within a given (game) environment.

Cameras and Marionettes in Ideology

Before we delve into ideology again, an important distinction has to be made in relation to the virtual body on the screen. When talking about third-person games, Klevjer (2023, p. 7) distinguishes between the "controllable marionette" of the actual player-character (the traveler 3D model in *Genshin Impact)* and the virtual camera that sits (in the case of *Genshin Impact*) in the overhead position above the game scene. For Klevjer (2006 in Klevjer, 2023, p. 7), this assumed "body" or a "gizmo" can be in some ways understood as the main avatar-body of the player.

However, the marionette is of utmost importance as well. The player-camera is an important formal structuring principle, guiding basic perceptual properties such as field of view, viewing distance, and the very frame we perceive the virtual world through. Nonetheless, it is the marionette which makes the perceptive situation legible. Its gestures, dynamism of movement, and kinaesthetic pleasure, which

produce certain affects (elucidated further in the next chapter), are all constitutive of how we relate to the game environment.

In other words, the player-camera cannot be uncoupled from player-characters in 3rd-person action games such as *Genshin Impact*. It is through their interlocking function that the virtual world lends itself to being inhabited and taken as *our own*.

It is through this perceptual terrain that ideology and Althusserian interpellation make themselves felt and visible through corporeal avatarhood. While an abstracting reduction can be made that would understand interpellation as solely related to formal properties of the game world and its interface, the fact remains that the progression system within *Genshin Impact* operates on a perceptually objective level within the gameworld.

Yes, I am rewarded for mining an iron ore (with battle pass points for example), but what is as important is the way I got to the iron ore: the jumps, the flights on my in-game rogallo, the slowly focusing mountains drawn by the game engine in the distance which only upon me getting closer and closer reveal the iron veins I can then utilize. Without the perceptive apparatus, there could be no progression system. The game systems make themselves legible and pleasurable only through the avatarhood I experience while playing the game. It is through the avatar that I encounter the gameworld (Jørgensen, 2013, p. 131).

There is, importantly, a habitual aspect to the experiential side of corporeal avatarhood, as reading the game world and orienting oneself within it is “a matter of perceptual habit” (Klevjer, 2012 as cited in Klevjer, 2023). And this perceptual habit is never neutral. As an open-world RPG, *Genshin Impact* elicits an illusion of a world that lends itself to similar activities as the physical world around us, what Jørgensen (2013, p. 100) calls “worldness”. But the exploration happening in the Teyvat is very different from the hike in the woods—and in many more respects, of course—since the very structure of the virtual world already contains within certain preferred modes of cognition and perception, of movement and interaction, a frame of (ludic and narrative) interpretation. These circumscribe possible ways of relation to it through our avatar proxy. This echoes previously discussed work of Garite (2003), who talks about embedded “mental structure” (Manovich, 2011, as cited in Garite, 2003, p. 5) within games and how they relate to ideology.

If Interpellation is all about selfhood and ways its constructedness is being naturalized by ideology, then open-world RPG, which makes itself attractive by association with free-roaming player subjects, is a case in point of the ideology effect.

As with every approach that emphasizes player freedom, ideological critique compels us to ask: freedom of who and by whom? Avatar in games like *Genshin Impact* is indeed also a game piece, an actant endowed by potency to solve game puzzles, to fight enemies, and undertake various challenges. On the most basic level, the avatar is also a tool for movement—to traverse the terrain of Teyvat and explore its world. Yet, a suspicion lingers that this tool still bears the marks of ideological interpellation. A formal structure of game rules embedded within the world of *Genshin Impact* makes sure that each step I take with my avatar-tool as well as avatar-body feeds back into the freemium logic of its business model.

This brings an interpellating effect beyond the mere demand of an accumulative game system. Before these systems can interpellate the player-character, it has to be situated and grounded in a game world. Interpellation is implicated in this cognitive orientation.

Interpellation then takes the form of an *interactive invitation to embody the avatar* and, through the *affordances channeled through it, enact a relationship to the game world*.

Avatar as an Ideological Subject Position

This formal structure, of course, cannot be uncoupled from the open world and the subject position within it.

To shed light on how the landscape of a game can become subjected to ideological effects, I turn to Daniel Vella's (2016) article on the typology of ludic subjectivity. His interest runs parallel to the issues of game ego, player position, and world inhabitation. For Vella (2016, p. 2), the ludic subject is the "'I' The player adopts while playing a game (..) The ludic subject-position is the 'perceptual standpoint' the player adopts in relation to the gameworld". Vella is very clear that this "experiential Gestalt" (Vella, 2016, p. 3) of playing a particular game results from "an aggregation of formal mechanisms that structure player's engagement with the gameworld." (Vella, 2016, p. 3) This experience of "oneself" when playing the game rests for Vella (2016, p. 3) on

mechanisms of *incorporation,* a sense of habituation, spatial standpoint as well as agency—affordances given by the gameworld to the player.

What results is a "body schema, a cognitive image of one's bodily existence within the world to which that existence relates". (Vella, 2016, p. 5) Vella's phenomenology-infused approach is complementary to our current discussion as it envisions the player subject as being actively constituted via the gameworld, its formal properties that structure perception of the "I" of the player. Including, we can contend, an avatar with its unique set of affordances mediated by the affective situation, using such affordances brings with it. In the case of *Genshin Impact* this includes for example: modes of traversal afforded to the player (the main ones walking, running, climbing, gliding, swimming); the activities the avatar can undertake in the world (foraging, combat, puzzle solving through elements, exploration etc.), the more abstracted affordances (expeditions, crafting), upgrading characters and items, all the way character party and the selection of characters with different elements conditions possible actions within the gameworld.

In the remainder of the article, Vella lists different subject positions, but from the point of this thesis, only "singular" and "multiple embodied ludic subjectivity" are of interest. (Vella, 2016, p. 5) For all of them, nevertheless, it is the *action* (as with Merleau's-Ponty's cognition, as always goal-oriented) that constitutes the ludic subject in a gameworld. (Vella, 2016, p. 4)

The action itself, or the construction of affordances, is what interpellation is channeled through. If it is only via the possible action towards the perceptive situation of the gameworld[35] that our ludic self gets established, then the logical thing to ask is who and to what ends creates the formal structure that makes it possible. In *Genshin Impact*, this subject formation is indeed underpinned by the logic of the gacha freemium genre. If nearly every part of the game is subsumed under the totalizing structure of interlocking progression and accumulation systems, then the very foundation of ludic subject that is mediated via the avatar is beholden to it as well. The result is a position that, via an avatar, inhabits the open world as an

[35] I want to emphasize that I understand this action not only in terms of manipulating the game code (such as Galloway, 2006), but also as one that is embodied (physically and cognitively) and that carries a certain affective charge.

instrumental space, one to be used to fulfill the basic imperative of endless accumulation and advancement.

At this point, it's perhaps useful to pause and revise what kind of ideologies playing *Genshin Impact* entails, that is, what ideologies are being mediated by the avatar-as-interface. We can see at least seven (mutually overlapping) ideological categories at play:

Ideological effect:	**Expressed in:**	**Exemplary game part:**
Pleasurable accumulation	gacha mechanics, free-to-play model	Wishes, elemental systems, character leveling
Mastery	of a world/player's individual fate	Exploration, quests, and a meta-layer of pleasurable UI
Subjective centrality	player-character locus of intelligibility	Exploration, combat, camera
Affection	towards characters/gameworld	Party, Wishes, gameplay gestures
Instrumentalisation	of gameworld/daily life	Crafting mechanics, Primogem collection
Fluid self-organisation	of game experience within daily rhythms	Expeditions, dailies, time-based dungeons

Counter-interpellation

A certain strand of thought, attempting to break away from Althusser's determinism, emerges through the work of scholars at the University of Quebec, Montreal, who are interested in the concept of counter-interpellation within gaming contexts. (Bourassa & Richert, 2022) Borrowing this idea from philosopher of language Jean-Jacques Lecercle, they point to the assumed margin of freedom of players to resist and rearticulate the interpellating force directed at them. I mainly draw from two articles *Figures of the Avatar: Semi-autonomous Agents, Presence Effects and Interpellation in Videogames* (Bourassa & Richert, 2022) and *Video Game Interpellation: Ideology and Critical Consciousness Based on the Game Celeste* (Richert et al., 2023). While different in the games they study, they nevertheless express a very similar approach to Althusser's interpellation within game studies.

In their paper, Bourassa & Richert (2022) understand counter-interpellation as a player's action (through their avatar) undertaken after being hailed by the NPCs (SAA in the author's terminology), coupling counter-interpellation with procedural rhetorics (Bogost, 2010). By Bourassa & Richert (2022, p. 8) equated with the interactive system demanding player action (like cries of infected in *Last of Us 2*, looks of NPCs in *Red Dead Redemption* or even gamepad vibrations) and the need of the player to respond to it via "procedural shifters" (Bourassa & Richert, 2022, p. 3), manipulating game systems. And since video games (via interpellation of NPCs/SAA) represent not only simulations of the world, but simulations of the relationship to the world as well, the counter-interpellation represents a reflective act in the face of disciplining algorithmic forces.

Counter-interpellation is being deployed in a similar vein by Richert et al. (2023) when analyzing *Celeste*. While their stated purpose for counter-interpellation is to develop critical consciousness (as per Freire 2021 in Richert et al., 2023, p. 8), the logic is nevertheless similar: when *Celeste* employs game design to interrogate themes of mental health, inclusiveness, and empowerment through the game's assist mode (allowing players to modulate arguably demanding gameplay). These create "awareness-raising" (Richert et al., 2023, p. 8) situations, which compel players to establish a distance between them and the supposedly often unquestioned ideological field of video games.

This conception of counter-interpellation as directly tied to interactivity nevertheless presents a slew of problems, namely the problematic distinction between preferred interactivity and critical counter-interpellation. When exactly is the demand placed upon me by a game (a one I am required to act upon correctly) different from the policeman on the street subjugating me to both an individual ("you") and place ("there")?

Since ideology is, for Althusser, always related to the whole system of relations of production and all-permeating, I am hesitant to contend that we can take a single artifact as a video game and present its inner workings as an example of counter-interpellation. As Garite (2003, p. 10) examines, on a structural level, video games are always beholden to a logic, according to which the individual player is the locus within a deeply disciplining system of a game. *Celeste* might represent

potentially socially important themes and concepts, even examine them within its rules, but it is still an entertainment artifact being developed within the capitalist system in order to be sold and attractive as a self-actualization work of art for the consumption of a player-consumer. An uneasy problem then emerges: can counter-interpellation exist within the prescribed structure of the game?

Sweet Escapism

Now, let me turn to Cassar (2013) once more to speculate on aspects of fantasy, escape, and hope that are related to reasons people favor certain kinds of pop culture. (Cassar, 2013, p. 15) Cassar explicitly talks about Gramsci's understanding of the appeal of superhero movies, novels, and other pop culture: they become "escape (an opium) from real life that in the vast majority of cases is bleak and dull", giving them "control absent in everyday life". (Cassar, 2013, p. 5) A classical explanation of the enduring popularity of heroic and self-actualization narratives and gameplay structures so often present in video games posits that these are fantasies that appeal to us precisely because we lack the (political) agency in our everyday life. Gramsci specifically talked about the "search for hope", rather than simple escapism, a more profound need than simply shielding oneself away from the realities of an unjust society. (Cassar, 2013, p. 15)

It seems fruitful to look at what this idea of control means in relation to *Genshin Impact*. While agency is at the heart of open-world experience (it is, after all, a whole wide world for our hero to travel and experience), what *Genshin Impact* presents is also a disciplining metastructure, exposing this freedom to a subjugating algorithmic structure. A part of this structure is of a different order than the one critiqued by, for example, Garite (2003): it is overt, explicit, visible at all times.

Now, let us pierce the skies of the planet Rubicon in *Armored Core VI* (FromSoftware, 2023) and take a closer look at bodily configurations, affects, and rhythms that are at play when we take control of an avatar.

2. Augmented Humans, Augmented Players: Mechanized Allegory of video game Embodiment in *Armored Core VI*

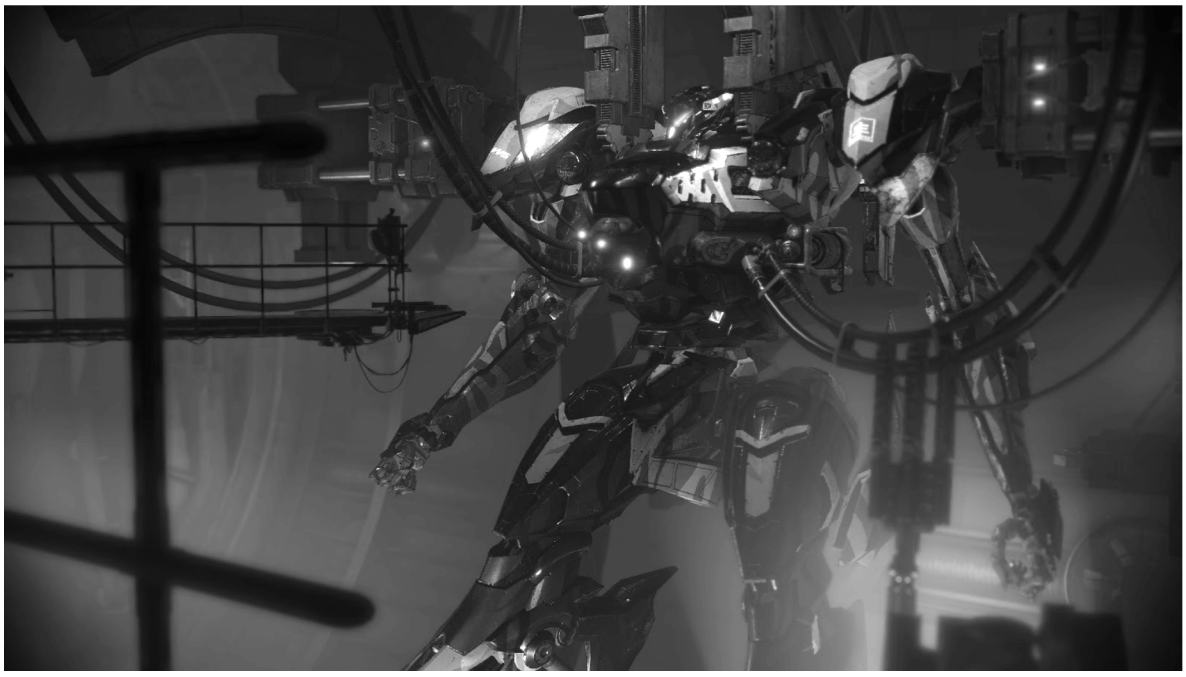


Fig 9. Player robot in a stowaway, getting ready for the next mission.

The cinematic shot is centered on the front module of a disabled machine. A cut to a quick ambush sequence of robots engaging an enemy. A snap cut back to sprawling tubes, leading to an elevated bed. The next shot reveals it's a human body: with some sort of contraption attached to the head, needles protruding towards the brain, skin covered by what looks like a plastic foil. The voiceover says: "This one is functional, but don't expect much more." Another voice replies: "Wake it up." Another film sequence shows robots falling one by one to the enemy fire. Cut. A bunch of tubes disentangle from what appears to be an ear. The last robot charges, destroying itself and the target in the process. The camera pans from a body covered with needles onto a robot torso towering above it. "621,

I'll give you a reason to exist," says a deep voice. The robot powers up with a red glint of its status lights.

The cinematic trailer for *Armored Core VI: Fires of Rubicon* (FromSoftware, 2023) eloquently sets the stage for another installment in the series of 3rd person action games featuring colossal robots. It shows the high-octane gameplay of robot-to-robot battles and the oppressive atmosphere of the titular planet Rubicon, onto which megacorporations descend to wage corporate war over the fossil-like resource called Coral. This trailer also hints at the themes that permeate the whole *Armored Core* series: the human on the bed, most probably the main character 621, is *"augmented",* making them able to pilot the giant war machines. Those are called "armored cores" in the game's parlance and, as per genre lingo, I will also refer to them interchangeably as mechs. Yet, as I will argue, this augmentation is not just a narrative device, but hints at a fruitful theoretical approach to the video game embodiment as such. One that deals with *augmented bodies* as well, but this time, it is the player who is augmented by the game and vice versa. (Keogh, 2018, p. 6)

Armored Core VI is an interesting game with which to delve into the specifics of player-avatar embodiment. Not only does it thematically resonate with the topic, but it also includes a core mechanic of altering[36] the titular *armored core* war machine-robot, swapping its parts with immediate procedural (game mechanical) and affective effects. Thus, *Armored Core VI* highlights how integral the modulation of the virtual body is to the game experience. *Armored Core VI* serves both as an allegory and illustration of what Brendan Keogh (2018, p. 135) calls *cybernetic web* emerging between player and a game, and at the same time lets players toy with it.

In the previous chapter, I close-played a popular open-world RPG *Genshin Impact* through the lens of Althusser's late Marxist conception of ideology and various affect-informed and phenomenology-infused approaches to avatar(hood). I explored that ideology critique in conjunction with theories of the gameworld constitution, rhythmicity, and temporality.

What emerged was the figure of the avatar that, through its affordances and affective framing, becomes the locus of the ideological interpellation: A focal point of

[36] Bódi (2022, p. 54) calls the option to modify avatar characteristics "configuration", resulting in a "configurative agency".

gameplay through which the gameworld becomes intelligible and its complex structure (that combines interactive, economic, and affective elements, inseparable from each other) makes its demand on players.

I hinted at affect and phenomenology as fruitful theoretical perspectives. Therefore, in this chapter, I will start with Keogh's (2018) account of video game phenomenology and tie it with *Armored Core*[37]'s main mech assembling game mechanic. I will complement this perspective by drawing attention to how the assembly mechanic can be read as a laboratory for tinkering with basic affective gameplay properties like rhythm (Kalmahlento, 2023; Anable, 2018; Apperley, 2010) and a sense of weight enacted through the gamepad (Keogh, 2018). I will tie these observations to the speculative potential of such game engagement (Kunzelman, 2023). I will demonstrate this reading by close-playing a concrete part of *Armored Core VI*, highlighting how different body configurations of the avatar directly influence the game feel (Swink, 2008).

Keogh (2018, p. 25) states that "body [is] always already altered by the objects and instruments we incorporate into our embodied experience of the world and by the habits we develop through reaching for and adapting to these objects". This chapter will also argue that by making the manipulation of the avatar-body the crux of its gameplay, *Armored Core VI* provides not only an exciting sci-fi battle action, but that the resulting agency also constitutes an aesthetic experience (Kalmahlento, 2023) that, via playing, calls attention to how player's own body is being reconfigured by the game. (Keogh, 2018)

The chapter will complement the gameplay analysis with a discussion of resonances between gameplay embodiment, allegory of *Armored Core VI,* and its narrative themes. I will thus briefly situate *Armored Core VI* within a longer lineage of the "mecha" genre (Gatti, 2021) that is historically both implicitly and explicitly interested in embodiment and its modalities. Apart from deepening the understanding of avatar

[37] In the remainder of this chapter, I will, for the purposes of stylistic clarity, use Armored Core as a stand-in for Armored Core VI: Fires of Rubicon. It is worth noting, however, that although I am dealing with only the latest installment in the long-running Armored Core series, the assembly mechanic that requires players to swap different parts of their robot is, in varying forms, present in every Armored Core game.

embodiment, this chapter aims to chart a path towards further investigations into how games can serve as playful allegories of their own mechanisms.

2.1 Cybernetic War Web

A fruitful approach, which will allow us to delve into structural aspects of ideology as working through a player's body (including her cognitive capacities), is Brendan Keogh's *Play of Bodies* (Keogh, 2018). As a phenomenological exploration of games and their various affective aspects, it has been a significant impetus for the inception of this thesis as well.

Of crucial importance are concepts of *embodied literacy* (Keogh, 2018, p. 14)*, cybernetic web* (Keogh, 2018, p. 135), and *dressage* (Keogh, 2018, p. 14), which Keogh uses to bring into focus forces orienting the player in the gameworld and their habitual aspects.

Keogh borrows embodied textuality from N. Katherine Hayles: "Embodied textuality that accounts for physicality and signification, form and content, as irreducible and inseparable." (Keogh, 2018, p. 49) In other words, since video game play (and any media consumption, for that matter) is embodied, the material, embodied engagement of the player's body necessarily precedes "any interpretative engagement with the video game virtual 'content'" (Keogh, 2018, p. 22). For Keogh, then, there is no way we can clearly distinguish between player and a video game, as both are not distinct subjects or objects imbued with preexisting essential qualities, but a "cybernetic assemblage of human body and nonhuman body across actual and virtual worlds." (Keogh, 2018, p. 22) The mind and body are ultimately inseparable when we play the game.

The body is fragmented within this cybernetic assemblage, which Keogh later calls *cybernetic web*, (Keogh, 2018, p. 135) to draw attention to multiplicity of properties that encircle the game situation (systems, inputs, audiovisuality and more): "body always already altered by the objects and instruments we incorporate into our embodied experience of the word and by the habits we develop through reaching for and adapting to these objects" (Keogh, 2018, p. 25)". Lastly, *dressage* is deployed by Keogh in the same way as hinted in the first chapter: "Through repetition, dressage

imbues in our self seemingly automatic or natural skills and movements as the very foundation of social being." (Keogh, 2018, p. 78)

Each of those concepts will be further discussed in the following sections.

2.1.2 From Assembly to Assemblage

This brings us to the gameplay of *Armored Core.* In the game, players take on the role of a nameless pilot, "augmented human" 621. Woken up on the orbit of the planet Rubicon, they soon plunge into battles between competing corporate bodies and planetary forces. They do so by piloting an armored core*,* a giant robotic war machine capable of wielding a slew of weapon systems and other auxiliary equipment. The game consists of many missions that take place in a contained area, typically including a small portion of reconnaissance (identifying enemies, determining the best approach towards the mission, etc.) and then the combat itself. Between missions, players spend time in a garage (called the "stowaway"), preparing for the subsequent encounters, listening to briefings and story segments, all via the game menu only. The 3D avatar of the robot only comes alive during assignments, special arenas, and multiplayer fights or while testing new loadouts. The rest happens via menus.

However, rather than just being a UI before we head into the next mission, the stowaway is an important part of *Armored Core* gameplay—especially the shop, where players can purchase new equipment, and the "assembly" section (see Fig. 10), where they choose from bought and differently obtained parts to assemble their robot with. At first, it might be surprising that it is the assembly where many players report spending a considerable amount of time. (Real_Imagination_180, 2023)

Yet, while many games contain different equipment pieces players can utilize, *Armored Core's* assembly mechanic is very detailed and has a vivid and immediate impact on how the robot behaves. It is true that other games, even by the same developer, such as *Elden Ring (FromSoftware, 2023),* do allow players to tinker with different weapons, armor, and other items that influence how the avatar moves.

Nevertheless, in the case of *Armored Core,* the result of avatar combinatorics is felt exceptionally vividly.[38]



Fig. 10: Assembly section of Armored Core VI: Stowaway menu. Note the indicators below that show changes to basic mech properties when selecting a new piece of equipment.

The humanoid-like war robot consists of four main weapon systems (two shoulder-mounted ones, one for each arm), arms, legs, core module, head module, generator module, targeting system, and boosters. Each of these parts has its own aerodynamic properties, weight, and energy output (see Fig. 10)—these dictate the possible combinations of parts and resulting "builds" of robots.

The constitution of each build influences basic gameplay properties—speed, jump height, turn rate, booster rate, energy recharge rate, and more. These dictate how the player has to behave when encountering enemies. For example, a crucial part of the gameplay is the dodge mechanic, where players can quickly press a button to avoid a targeted projectile. And the weight of the robot, the type of boosters deployed, and the generator available all influence how soon a player can use another dodge after dodging. Coupled with differing reload speeds for different weapons and, for example, jump height of various types of leg modules (and weight

[38] It would thus seem that there is a spectrum of intensity or avatar behavior alteration afforded by game mechanics, rather than it being a clear-cut category.

of the overall robot build), each composition has its own impact on how the game feels to play—how it feels to control the heavy machinery with your gamepad.

So, when we enter *Armored Core*'s world, we are altered by all the properties of the game, which become part of our embodied experience. We, as perceiving subjects modulated by the avatar and via our interactions with the game through the cursor in the menu, are produced by this "cybernetic amalgam" (Keogh, 2018, p. 27). Clearly, this situation takes place on a pre-interpretative level, mobilizing cognition, affects, and, as Keogh points out several times, somatic postures and abilities.

The different *Armored Core* builds (configurations of the robot) demand varying embodied, cognitive and physical orientations—not only in terms of the dexterity of gamepad maneuvering (lightweight build requires considerably different reaction speeds than a tank-like build), but also in terms of the spatial orientation, the need to track rhythms of different weapon and auxiliary systems like reload times, jump refresh cooldown, booster fuel refresh cooldown, etc.

A game like *Armored Core* draws attention to how much different kinds of avatar bodies, in conjunction with the surrounding game rules, influence the feeling of embodying them. It highlights and exaggerates sometimes easy-to-overlook changes to the *cybernetic web* (Keogh, 2018, p. 135) between the game on the screen, the avatar with its affordances and properties.

Keogh's position is post-human. He does not privilege the game or the player per se, potentially resulting in some frictions with my conceptualisation of avatar ideology. Yet, in his exploration of various video games through this lens, we can already see multiple entry points where we can use his model and tie it to ideology.

2.1.3 Reconfigured by Whom?

Kordela (2023, p. 2), following Spinoza and Marx discusses the human subject as a "process", whereby "individual is never a finished product but is rather always a becoming (…) [and that] individuals are not discrete entities but are always caught up in an immanent network in which they are actively further individuated and

produced."[39] (Human) subject without essentially understood autonomy or agency, and is always mediated by the "active existence of other objects and spaces" (Keogh, 2018, p. 29), an uneasy question of hierarchies of exertion of control emerges. If, as Keogh suggests, players adapt and adjust their postures and movements to the demands of the game, we already enter an ideologically fraught terrain. Keogh himself draws from the critical work of James Ash when he states that "videogames reconfigure the body, and they are experienced through this reconfigured body" (Keogh, 2018, p. 89). This reconfiguration is not just a question of repetitive movements, but a sensitization to "particular forms of somatic and analytic attunement". (Keogh, 2018, p. 91)

This already gives us a critical vocabulary through which we can assess the effects of ideology on avatar (and player) bodies in broad strokes. Incorporated, we enter the gameworlds and voluntarily give ourselves over to them. Ideology perhaps lies in the ways games utilize "attunements" and, at the same time, "attune" players.

This is clearly not limited to procedures (game rules and their logic) either. As we have seen in the previous chapter, they (like progression systems of *Genshin Impact*) can only be effective, if the player is right from the start being situated within the world of the game by its audiovisual properties, the structure of the terrain, the perspective of the camera, all the little things that conjoin our cognitive apparatus in the moment of play as well as our body—in Jørgensen's (2013) terms, within a gameworld. The UI animations are experienced as synaesthetically pleasurable through our fingers (on a screen, keyboard, gamepad, and other peripherals). We take joy in the way our characters move, and we hear pleasurable sounds of clashing virtual bodies. Keogh (2018, p. 114): "The properties of objects in video games, tangibly perceived by the player, communicate their tactility through an entwining of how they look, how they sound, how they feel." Or, as per Klevjer (2022, p. 206): "avatar-based 3D (…) becomes primarily a matter of machinic and vertiginous pleasure."

[39] This outlook on subjectivity slots neatly into discussions of affect and how subjectivity is produced through affective encounters. Or, as Deleuze in Kordela (20203, p. 1) puts it: "singular essence [means that] individual is first of all (…) a degree of power [of] acting" or "affecting other individuals" (Kordela, 2023, p. 1) and "a certain capacity for being affected [by other individuals]".

Armored Core VI Mission Close Playthrough

Let's take one of the later missions, named "Attack the Refueling Base", as an example. The player is tasked with destroying a military base, a job issued by a corporation unhappy with the presence of the armed forces seeking to halt their endeavours on Rubicon. In the stowaway section, I have to assemble a mech for this mission. Lately, I have been using an agile, yet fragile, lightweight build. However, during this job, I expect to face heavy resistance. So, I decide to give up some (for me, as a player, pleasurable) manoeuvrability and sleek look for a more heavy approach: I swap my two aerodynamic legs for a tetrapod, adding to my weight and my boost speed, but significantly increasing the stability of my mech and making me able to select heavier equipment. I pick heavy weapons (a combination of flamethrower, a Gatling gun, a shoulder grenade launcher, and another Gatling gun), then select a different head, core, and generator to support this build. I choose a balanced aiming system that will force me to stay mostly close-range/mid-range to enemies in order for my weapons to be effective. This will require a head-on approach, sacrificing athletic performance for sheer firepower. I also repaint my mech and adorn it with new decals and stickers. I want to make this war machine the most "mine" as I can, after all.

I appear on the snow-ridden landscape of Rubicon (see Fig. 11), framed by the dense clouds in the orange-tinted atmosphere, perhaps fires of the raging war over the semi-sentient energy source called coral. I am but a pawn in a great game of mighty corporations and a protectorate army keen on taking over this vital matter, not reminiscent of Earth's oil. I push on the sticks of my gamepad, and my bipedal mech clanks forward, his artificial joints hissing with air pressure, sleek metal frame glinting in the sun.

I maneuver a little to try my new build, taking mental note of a) how much continuous levitation can my mech sustain, that is, how fast it drains by boost gauge (boost gauge replenishes after not moving for a few seconds), b) how many dodges I can make with my current boost gauge and c) how often my guns need to be reloaded. These are main components of the base gameplay rhythm and "attunements," which, in order to play semi-optimally, I have to be aware of at all times.



Fig. 11: The beginning of the "Attack the Refueling Base" mission.

As the synthwave soundtrack reaches its climax, I press Shift and initiate a boosted horizontal movement (that depletes only a portion of the gauge and does not deplete continuously further) in the direction of the target. I make a few circles in the snow to get a sense of how my heavy mech behaves and because it feels good. Enemies spot me, and I press the middle mouse button to lock on. I jump upwards with an audible rocket-fueled blast, a projectile is fired towards me, and I dodge by pressing shift+directional arrow keys. I circle the enemies mid-air, firing my rumbling Gatling gun. Each movement, each press of a button in *Armored Core*, is tethered to a meticulously crafted sound effect that emphasizes the machinic nature of my war mech. Each weapon or movement apparatus animation is timed to underscore how big and heavy my robot is, yet capable of sleek, acrobatic movements. I quickly dodge again to hide behind a block of buildings to evade enemy attacks. With the remainder of my boost, I jump up, getting an overhead advantage, taking in the desolate industrial landscape of this base, the darkened chimneys and massive pipes, the girder sections and ramps where some gargantuan contraption left its tracks.

I jump outside of my cover, firing my flamethrower and the Gatling gun simultaneously, successfully eliminating the first group of enemies. I cruise into the shade of another industrial structure to recharge. I press V to scan my surroundings and press forward.

I continue to evade attacks in order not to get staggered—after a few strong blows, my mech will become momentarily incapacitated, leaving me greatly vulnerable for a few seconds. I hide in covers to replenish both my stagger meter and a boost gauge, circle around the easy enemies, evading snipers, dodging to attack them, and back to cover. In addition to all the attacks, I have to use my mouse to search for targets and to turn my mech around, oftentimes flipping my wrist in quick motion. I only sustained a handful of injuries, and I am happy with my performance. With each kill, I see a score pop up in the bottom right section of the screen. A score that translates into credits in the gig coral economy. On the horizon, a huge, almost inhuman spire looms as my giant legs crush any vehicles or small structures that come into their way. So far, my mech was a death machine, unleashing fire with its four armaments without much resistance.

This changes in the next section, though, as I encounter a formidable foe, a war machine not unlike mine but of an older generation, yet still formidable. For this fight, I have not only to dodge and carefully expend my boost, but I also need to take note of the enemy's own stagger meter—forcing me to sustain fire if needed and plan my attacks so I can, ideally, hit them with all weapons at once. This introduces another rhythmic variable into the fight, with the addition of a new attack types. The enemy is shooting towards me: they've got a strong handgun, a shield, and a shoulder rocket launcher, all with their own fire rates and reload times. Luckily, my flamethrower seems to work well against their type of defense. After a few circles and dodges, I ultimately manage to get close to staggering them with my flamethrower and with four presses of buttons at the same time (left mouse button, right mouse button, Q, and E), I fire everything I have, stunning, and then destroying them in a flurry of fire.

So far, this mission has taken me about 3 minutes, all the while various elements of the game UI and sound cues kept informing me of my status: of my remaining health (and repair kits), of ammunition left. Just now, an intercom voice tells me "left hand ammunition at 10 %." I'll have to adjust my playstyle so that I don't get surprised when my Gatling cannon runs out. A section populated by hovering sniper drones reveals itself, with an alert system audibly alerting me to the incoming projectile as I charge a narrow section with fortified automatic guns pointed my way—I have to circle them and hit their uncovered backs, while avoiding bullets from machines on the ground and beams of energy shot from the air. I think about all the mecha media

I encountered before playing *Armored Core*—all the fights in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Gainax, 1995), *Code Geass* (Sunrise, 2006), literary works (Heartscape, 2016), or other games such as *Heaven Will Be Mine* (Pillow Fight Games, 2018). There is something comforting about reliving this huge war machine fantasy, making me wonder about all the popular media readings of through queerness (Orton, 2021), post-humanity (Wright, 2023), or warfare subjectivity (Lacina, 2023). I make a few pirouettes and erase the gun platforms from the face of Rubicon with my shoulder grenade launchers while dispatching snipers with a Gatling gun round.

A while later, I resupply at a checkpoint, indicating a possible boss fight. I reach the designated military base, its big refinery dome towering in front of me. I destroy snipers and turrets present, and shoot the base's core, my primary target.

I am informed that something is in the "stratosphere, approaching fast" by the intercom. These are two more *armored cores,* tough enemies in dark grey armor, with the red dots of their visors (a hallmark of the series, also present in the main menu and trailers) pointed at me, their light diffused with a cinematic effect. The soundtrack changes as enemies boost toward me.

One of them specializes in close combat, trying to continuously charge towards me with a pulse blade, while the other fires medium-range laser shots. This is a rhythm I am not used to, and even though I manage to stagger one of them, I am quickly killed. The second time, I try to use the openings when some of their own boost gauges get depleted and they have to stop their movement. I fire all I got, being sure to use my repair kits on time. I kill one of them, but another finishes me off while I am focused on the other one, not recognizing soon enough that a pulse blade is coming my way. Seems like I am too slow. These are, after all, elite forces of Planetary Closure Administration, veterans sent to execute me on my mission to please my corporate overlords and earn my pay,

Defeat screen allows me to enter assembly again and try the fight once more with a different setup. I switch to a more lightweight build, featuring bipedal legs and swapping the shoulder gatling gun for another grenade launcher (I struggle to keep up with the game's pace, holding E all the time anyway), along with a close-quarter aiming system and a lightweight core. After two more tries, my strategy (once I get the hang of it) seems to be working. I can evade the quick close-range attacks better,

and my new legs allow me to jump further upwards to get an advantage. I stagger the first enemy three times, then eliminate them (being mindful of the reload rhythm of my grenade launchers to unleash them at the right time while the enemy is stunned). Afterwards, I stun the other one. With two simultaneous button presses, I unleash grenades, and the fight ends—the in-game camera pans, zooms onto a reeling enemy, blueish energy ramping up inside its disintegrating hull. It vaporizes in a sudden explosion as I hear its last, vainly defiant words in the intercom.

Mission accomplished, the corporation Arquebus got their piece of spectacular action, but the game's system ranks my performance with a letter "D". Done, but not nicely. Back to the assembly, I guess.

Rhythmic Embodiments

A crucial aspect of this game embodiment is naturalization: "ways of moving through the world (...) are habitualized by the body, they retreat to the background of our perception." (Keogh, 2018, p. 25) This habituation is dependent upon two things. First, there is an already existing preposition that the player enters the game with, one relating to genre, to the ways of interacting with the game based on how it looks, the conventions of the video game medium, the expectation of a certain valorization of player actions, etc. Secondly, there is a habitual repetition of video game actions, constitutive of a certain game rhythm and temporality.

Keogh introduces the term *dressage*[40], coined by Henri Lefebvre, to describe this habitual aspect of a video game and the continuous naturalization of it. "Through repetition, dressage imbues in our self seemingly automatic or natural skills and movements as the very foundation of social being." (Keogh, 2018, p. 78) Although Keogh mostly relates dressage to the naturalized somatic knowledge of the input system (the gamepad, the keyboard, and mouse), since all bodily reactions are intrinsically and indelibly tied to cognitive orientations, dressage is not just a question of a certain configuration of inputs, but ofthe structure of the experience as such.

[40] Here, Lefebvre's concept of *rhythmanalysis,* which I already discussed, could be mentioned. I decided to focus on dressage as it is the key concept used by Keogh (2018) in the context of games.

The *Armored Core*'s gameworld opens itself to certain rhythms and, by enabling us to modulate them via assembly, highlights this structural principle, the functional aspect of the functional landscape of Rubicon.

While substantially different in execution, we can see the parallels between *Genshin Impact* and *Armored Core*: both games modulate rhythms (albeit to different ends) and affectively (via kinaesthetic pleasure) bind players to their respective interfaces.

Constituting part of ideology is its naturalization (Hebdige, 2002, as cited in Cassar, 2013, p. 333) and—for thinkers like Althusser (2014, p. 260)—its ritualized and habitual property. It could be said that ideology in games is not (only) some easily identifiable force that we can directly point to, but a result of repeated actions which are naturalized to the point of fading into the background.

Genshin Impact's different characters and their respective rhythms find their parallels in various *Armored Core* builds that substantially alter the "aesthetics of agency" (Kalmanlehto, 2023). Deployed to different ends, in both cases, it is a synaesthetic pleasure of controlling the avatar that interacts differently with the gameworld based on its temporal order, which is at the heart of our gameplay experience and affective investment.

Near the end of chapter 1, Keogh says: "The videogame text is located in neither virtual world nor the actual world but in the perceptual ebb and flow of attention between the player's flesh, the video game hardware and audiovisual-haptic representation." (Keogh, 2018, p. 49) What his work leaves open is the question of how much freedom there is in negotiating this flow.

We will explore these implications after further analyzing *Armored Core's* rhythm by discussing current game studies literature on affect, rhythm, and agency as channeled through the figure of the avatar.

2.2 Affective Cybernetic Embodiment

A fruitful complementary apparatus to Keogh's posthumanism is offered by Aubrey Anable's book *Playing With Feeling (2018).* In it, Anable applies a particular strand of affect theory to video games, while critiquing both other theorisations of affect and

what she perceives as dominant perspectives in game studies, most notably those that privilege computation over representation.

For Anable, affect theory is, on the one hand, a way to "read across code, images, and bodies without reducing video games to either their representational qualities or their digital and mechanical properties. (Anable, 2019, p. xv) An integrated approach that "allows us to see how game mechanics are intimately tied to their representational practices and that game mechanics, code, and software are themselves also kinds of fictions we tell ourselves" (Anable, 2019, p. xiv). On the other hand, building on the work of Raymond Williams, for her affect serves to situate video games as a "interface for grasping contemporary structures of feeling. (Anable, 2019, p. xix). Most interestingly for our discussion, Anable reads games as objects that "give color, rhythm, shape, and sound—a texture and a tone—to time spent with everyday computational systems." (Anable, 2019, p. xii)

Both this section and a chapter as a whole ask an additional question: Can a video game serve as an allegory of itself? Viewed through the lens of Anable's work, *Armored Core* is both a self-contained object with its affective properties and at the same time emblematic of larger affective structures of living with cybernetic systems. As I will argue, this double function is enabled by the fact that the game integrates these structures of being with "everyday computational systems" into its very mechanics—in the way it focuses on assembling mechs and resulting changes of affective texture.

2.2.1 Across Bodies and Code

By focusing on the affective dimension of gaming experience, Anable does not discriminate (or privilege) code over representation, mechanics over the audiovisuality, or haptics. She uses the term "game affect" (Anable, 2019, p. 44) as a synthetic term "to refer to the aspects of emotions, feelings, and bodily engagement that circulate through people and things but are often registered only at the interface— at the moment of transmission or contact— when affect gets called up into representation." (Anable, 2019, p. xviii)

The "ludic interface" (Anable, 2019, p. 38), where the affect makes itself felt, echoes the concept of *avatar-as-interface* I am developing throughout this thesis. If "Affect is

what puts bodies and/as forms into relation to each other in time and space," (Anable, 2019, p. 9) we can understand avatarial interface as a crucial site where this orientation takes place, a locus of intelligibility, resulting in an "affective systems and that takes into consideration how bodies, code, hardware, images, sounds, and sociohistorical contexts work together to give shape to feelings that exceed any one of these locations or modes of interpretation." (p. xvii)

Anable is deeply invested in critiquing (in her view) prevalent ways games are conceptualized within game studies—being especially critical of formal focus on code and surface/depth binary that views representations in games as surface effects of cybernetic structure. Because my position aligns with the "Second Wave of Game Studies" (Fickle, 2019, p. 3, as cited in Kunzelman, 2023, p. 18), which sidesteps these older conceptual divisions, I do not wish to rehearse this discussion here. Yet, this sort of "flat" conceptualisation, where neither part of the game experience is privileged, helps to shed light on the deep interconnectedness of all the aspects of (not only) *Armored Core* gameplay I've been discussing so far.

Considering the aforementioned gameplay section of *Armored Core* with its multitude of components, cognitive/physical activations of the player, this section from Anable (2019, p. 44) is helpful:

> "Eugénie Shinkle links affect and video games through precognitive processes of proprioception—the way the body processes subtle sensory information from the environment to track its position and movement through space. Pleasure in a game is derived, according to Shinkle, through a complex interplay of the body in proximity to the gaming apparatus, the feel of the game controller in the hands, and the images, sounds, and other aesthetic information in the game."

The resulting "affective relationship that is created between and across the games' images, sounds, mechanics, hardware, algorithms, and players" (Anable, 2019, p. 122) is what Annable calls "game affect" (Anable, 2019, p. 44). Yes, we are compelled by algorithmic structures, but also through "ways these structures are given representational form visually, narratively, and aurally, and through the designed intimacy of their interfaces and the contexts of our play." (Anable, 2019, p. 52) Once again, it is at the interface where this "entanglement" of "computation and

representation (...) affect and cognition, bodies and intelligence" (Anable, 2019, p. 56) is being mediated.

Feeling (War) Machines

What is notable is the presence of the social context in Anable's conceptualization of the game affect. Throughout her book, an idea of video games as affectively and historically tied to the affects around cybernetic processes emerges: "Through technological, aesthetic, and historical affordances, video games offer us ways of *being with and feeling machines.***"** (Anable, 2019, p. 39, emphasis mine).

From their beginnings in the 1950s and 1960s of the 20th century, video games were used to sensuously demonstrate the inaccessible power of code and computation (Anable, 2019, p. 125). I would argue that this function/property of video games did not diminish with their gradual rise in popularity and technical complexity. Perhaps, the opposite—via games we can grasp the complicated nature of our own intertwining with machinic/cybernetic technologies.[41]

This brings us to *Armored Core* and the way it can function as an allegory for "being and feeling machines", where the gameplay situation and the narrative (about embodying a machine) becomes a way to affectively conceptualize how we relate to cybernetic systems at large—how they reconfigure our bodies, attune our cognitive apparati and entangle us via their code and representation.

Anable (2019, p. 66) writes about a touchscreen-based game *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP* (Superbrothers, 2011): "Touching in the right way makes the relationship between the game's code and its images sensible. This is a way of feeling code. It is a kind of intimacy with computational systems that we do not generally experience through other digital interactions."

Armored Core, by allowing us to tinker so granularly with our virtual body, makes sensible the relationship not only between games' own code, but also of the code of other games. Through the physics engine, rhythms, resulting weight, and sounds, *Armored Core* can make us tangibly aware of the way the configuration of the game

[41] A similar argument is made by Wark (2007) in *Gamer Theory*. While Wark is very much focused on procedurality, she similarly sees games as objects that reflect the gamified nature of the non-gaming world.

(experienced via the ludic interface that is the avatar-as-interface) alters our being in the game world and the world outside of the game as well.

If per Annable (drawing from Raymond Williams) “affect speaks to the spaces, forces, and moments that fall outside the discursive boundary lines of work, home, and social life” (Annable, 2019, p. 100), games like *Armored Core*, marketed as home entertainment products, stories happening in a grim vision of the future, can tell us a lot about the way overarching cybernetic systems subsume our own bodies.

To that end, let us, finally, turn to the speculative potential of such allegorical reading.

2.3 Mech(anics) of Speculation

While Anable’s book lists many examples of games that utilize affect, it sometimes struggles to precisely localize when affect arises during gameplay, relegating it to a more generalized texture of the game experience. She might point to the affectively charged mechanics of a given game, such as the gridlike structure of *Plants vs. Zombies* (PopCap Games*, 2009*) or *Kentucky Route Zero*’s (Cardboard Computer, 2020) dialogue system, yet I feel our present analysis needs a more focused approach. While affectively charged, what is the structural logic of the assembly mechanic in *Armored Core* VI?

Cameron Kunzelman offers one possible answer in the form of a concept he calls the *mechanics of speculation*. He defines it in his book *The World is Born From Zero* as “the moments in videogame interaction in which players are prompted to consider different arrangements of the world.” (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 102) Mechanics of speculation describe the relationship between an “input and potential output” (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 3), a “way that the output derived from the input might undermine the premise of the game, the fiction of the game world, or the established relationship between the player and that game.” (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 43). These mechanics, however, are not purely interactive acts—they are driven by intention (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 46), which enables speculation, the ability to “imagine potential worlds” on a formal level (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 53).

This intentionality is why Kunzelman grounds speculation in the science-fiction genre (while, I’d argue, it is not exclusive to it). Drawing from a tradition of speculative

philosophy (most notably from Quentin Meillassoux), Kunzelman contends that we might expect an outcome (before pressing a game button), but we don't know it and can't be sure, prompting us to consider "potential arrangements of the world" (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 42):

> They [video games] ask us to play within a world that now exists in a way that was different from the moments before; it is the moment before we get to that new world, in the second before the button is clicked or as the narrative scene is playing out, that speculation is at work. (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 30)

Mechanical speculation is tied both to the overarching plot and narrative themes and minutiae, "micro-movements" (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 35), and for Kunzelman has almost an ethical impetus, whence "new worlds could be formed." (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 43). Crucially, there is no reason why these worlds have to be emancipatory, as exemplified by the entire chapter of the book dedicated to new forms of immaterial labor within games, enabled by the same speculative properties.

We can already see where Kunzelman offers a critical language to complement the already discussed literature on affect and cybernetic embodiment. If speculation happens "bit by bit" (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 15) and in the "routine connection between player and the game" (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 15), it can be tied back to the already mentioned questions of ideologically fraught habituation.

2.3.1 Assembling Speculation

When I click to assemble my mech part, I speculate on what possible effects it might have on my in-game military capabilities and my very physical players' bodies. While I am presented with some gauges that guide my expectation (such as the weight of a given part), the resulting affective situation, which modulates my avatar-as-interface, is hard to predict without spending a considerable amount of time with the game, if at all. If we were to follow Kunzelman's logic, the moment I push the "Sortie" button to start a mission, I am forced to consider how my in-game augmented body will behave—prompting me to think about all the ways real bodies are (re)arranged by the myriad of objects they encounter with each passing moment. This speculation is upheld by the sci-fi narrative of the game as well, portraying the in-game character as deeply enmeshed with their mech.

Kunzelman (2023, p. 53) writes: "The 'what could happen?' is transformed into a 'what is happening?' Within that, we build knowledge; we experiment; we gain experience outside of the regular conditions of our lives." This experimentation continually falls back on the question of cybernetic subjectivity, which is inextricable from the affective situation in which this speculation takes place. At another point, Kunzelman conjures the term "fictionalized phenomenology" (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 25) lifted from Veronica Hollinger to describe the way contemporary condition is abstracted into "science fictional fabulation". It is precisely this fictionalized (cybernetic) phenomenology that *Armored Core* offers.[42]

Game mechanics of speculation, perhaps, can also have a different direction: they can reflect on the rules of our lives that are brought into the fore by the act of speculation within a game. *Armored Core VI* thus appears to both offer a way to speculate on subtle modulation of play-game embodiment and embodiment in our everyday life more broadly.

When Kunzelman notes that there are extrapolative aspects to science fiction games as well as genre-specific "cluster of science fictional mechanical experience that migrate from game to game" (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 13), it draws an interesting critical lens on the way *Armored Core* deploys weapons systems. Kunzelman (2023, p. 14) mentions the translation of a shotgun from the real world into games like Gears of War or Mass Effect. These all feature human protagonists. On the other hand, *Armored Core* does not—and the idea that a war machine would wield weapons like a person would, moreover, the usual human kinds (handgun/shotgun/LMG), is both a bit silly and critically fruitful.

Indeed, war machines like the ones in *Armored Core* feel, to some degree, preposterous. Surely there is a more efficient form factor of a super-modern war

[42] This cyborg reading of the avatar is somewhat complicated by Klevjer (2022, p. 208), who argues that the avatar embodiment is capable of both transgressing the "boundary between the self and technology" and confirming it. Yet, "the body of the avatar may be seen as a corporealization of a technologically augmented self (…) the vehicular avatar gets in-between the player and the cybernetic machine, as a replacement, rather than as a manifestation of cyborg consciousness." (Klevjer, 2022, p. 208) In my view, this in-betweenness of an avatar is another argument as to why the avatar can be understood as the interface through which we enter the machinic domain.

vehicle than one with a humanoid-like constitution? Moreover, one that has hands and bears conventionally-coded weapons?

Therefore, it is safe to assume that the *Armored Core* looks this way because it (semi) consciously serves as a metaphor for embodiment as such, modeled after a real human body. A glance at the critical and journalistic pieces surrounding the game (and the mechanics genre as a whole) seems to support this observation. (Wright, 2023; Lacina, 2023)

The Spectre of Ideology

What haunts this discussion is, indeed, a question of ideology, especially the one channeled through the avatar-as-interface. Kunzelman's answer is subjectivation, a term borrowed from Félix Guattari: "Rather than conceiving of the subject as a nodule with characteristics that then has experiences, Guattari advocates for an understanding of the subject as something that is always in flux and which alters in composition and quality during encounters with other things in the world." (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 69) Kunzelman then develops "a mode of understanding game subjectivity not as something fixed then augmented but as a cluster of qualities that are always, and are constantly, in flux. That flux is then operated on by the outside world, manipulated into certain codes and shapes." (Kunzelman, 2023, p. 75)

It is here, through Guattari, that Kunzelman's theory of subjectivity aligns with that of the affective theory: "Affect arises in the midst of *in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon. (…) [Affect are the] visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotions—that can serve to drive us towards movement, toward thought and extension[.]" (Gregg & Siegworth, 2010, p. 1). A subject is thus always co-constituted by the attendant affective effects of any given relation it finds itself enmeshed with: "a body is as much outside itself as in itself—webbed in relations[.]" (Gregg & Siegworth, 2010, p. 3) Avatar-as-interface, like the one in *Armored Core*, can be seen as one part of the "complex assemblages that come to compose bodies and worlds simultaneously," what Gregg Gregg & Siegworth (2010, p. 6) describe as "Deleuze's Spinozan route" toward affect as situated in the relations all things enter into with other things. The mech in the game can be read as a metaphor for such body, co-constituted by the interchangeable parts that are co-effected with/by it at the moment of mission start: the body of the pilot (never represented more concretely than a brain from the intro

cinematic) is one that is seemingly *totally* constituted by the outside augmentations and extensions. This body is purely technical in its "becoming".

While the human (player's) body is definitely actualized based on certain biological potentials, *Armored Core* presents a *visceral allegory* of how there is no "clear delineation of subject/object, no easily sustained interior/exterior world in such processual engagement" (Gregg & Siegworth, 2010, p. 12) in our existence. It does so not only through narrative representation, but its very gameworld and resulting aesthetic situation: one found both in the gritty sci-fi imaginary, via its mechanics of (bodily) speculation, via soundtrack and sound design, and rhythmic gameplay that undergirds it all: "Our subjectivity is processed through beats produced by designers and rhythmic patterns established by social structures. To play a game, you have to become a certain kind of person." (Kunzelman, 2022, p. 75)

To play *Armored Core*, we have to become a particular kind of "gaming body" (Apperley, 2010, p. 23), ready to alter our gamic rhythms in accordance with the demands of the gameworld challenges, to renegotiate how we relate to the avatar again and again, to toy with bodily extensions to finish the mission before us. Oftentimes, an emotionally charged microconflict arises between wanting to keep a given build (I, personally, took a liking to the aerodynamic, sleek forms) and what is most effective in the virtual war. As a second-order metaphor, through the avatarial interface, *Armored Core* seems to thematize the tension we feel in our everyday lives when being asked to conform to rhythms and affects of contemporary capitalism, oftentimes pushing against our other wishes.

In dry Althusserian terms: through the virtual mech we are interpellated by the game mechanics and affective situation to relate to our material reality as something that can be neatly slotted into our lives if we are willing to alter our very being. Any friction we might have initially felt towards the idea of exchanging our bodily rhythms (and risking arrhythmia) for victory (in game), is quickly subsumed by the repetitive *dressage* or *training*: "Via play, players are subjectivated by a process that encompasses them and demands that they interact with the game in a certain way lest they fail immediately, and across a playthrough that becomes naturalized to the point where that friction is no longer recognized. (...) This automatic learning process, with the behaviours I have absorbed with them, is subjectivation." (Kunzelman, 2022, p. 86)

Immaterial Labor on Rubicon

For Kunzelman, this is especially reflected in the context of labour, incidentally one of the topics *Armored Core* indirectly addresses. To explore this claim, we can finish by commenting on the labour aspect of the game, especially when both Anable (2018) and Kunzelman (2022) devote whole chapters to labor affects and labor speculations in games, respectively.

Anable talks about how through casual (mobile) games we are "invited to engage with systems of measurement and evaluation that produce us not as concrete workers, but rather as subjects of the mobile, liminal, and affective temporalities of labor in the twenty-first century." (Anable, 2018, p. 80) These games "make the time and work of the digital device newly legible in ways that reflect how these same aspects of our everyday digital experiences are often submerged beneath the rhetoric of ease, efficiency, and flow." (p. 89)

At first glance, *Armored Core* bears little similarity to casual games like *Plants vs. Zombies* (PopCap Games, 2009). Yet, your endeavors on the surface of Rubicon are strongly framed in the terms of work and employment. You are employed as a (partially involuntary) freelancer (even termed as such by the game characters), flexibly working for numerous, mutually competing corporations. One way of reading this—echoed by journalistic/essayistic accounts, such as Cole (2023)—is that, despite the sci-fi setting, *Armored Core* mirrors an exaggerated version of the actual situation of freelancers in our world.

Interpreting the game through Annable's lens, though, paints a picture that points towards how our labouring bodies are implicated through cybernetic systems and machines—in many cases, arguably, the very same machines we use to play *Armored Core*.

The gameplay of *Armored Core* consists mainly of various "missions". Each mission offers a "base pay" of in-game fictional currency COAM, used to purchase new equipment in the shop (body parts, weapons, upgrades), widening the options the player has when assembling their mech. What is crucial for our discussion in this section is the fact that the amount of COAM players receive is related to their performance. Leaving bonus objectives aside, a certain amount of COAM is deducted

from the “base pay” calculated on how much damage the player's robot received during the mission and how much ammunition was exhausted. After completing a given mission for the first time, it can then be replayed from a special menu, awarding COAM as well.

Player’s actions in *Armored Core* are therefore directly evaluated by the game in fictional monetary terms, and the player’s success is directly related to the various affective and embodied aspects we have been discussing so far. Succeeding in *Armored Core* means: being able to read all the information game relays correctly; selecting a correct assembly build for the job and being able to control it efficiently, internalizing rhythms of both your own robot and those of enemies to evade enemy attacks and maximize the efficiency of your own actions in terms of ammo expenses. These all require not only physical dexterity (honed over time), but also getting accustomed to how game handles different assemblies and choose the one fitting your own playstyle disposition accordingly—usually, there is no correct solution to mastering a given mission, instead, it hinges on how are players able to accommodate themselves to the complex two-way embodied situation where training, personal capabilities and a degree of manipulation via assembly coalesce.

This situation is directly related to ways digital labour in the 21st century gets enacted through various cybernetic interfaces, echoing the issues surrounding the immaterial labour as described by Lazarrato: “Subjectivity itself is fused with machinery to such a degree that a subject experiences themselves as self-same with the machine and its demands” (Lazarrato, 2014 as cited in Kunzelman, 2022, p. 70) Seen this way, avatarial interface of *Armored Core* might be understood as a key part of “potential labour” (Kunzelman, 2022, p. 97), whereby players “hone technique and (...) perform immaterial labour in the moment of gameplay that makes players a better fit for labor conditions in the future.” (Kunzelman, 2022., 96). Kunzelman mentions the game *VA-11 Hall-A* (Sukeban Games, 2016) and how it “figures labor and interfaces together, producing a subject in the moment of gameplay who labors to produce a ground on which an accelerated interface economy could be produced: potential labor, or the labor that produces economic possibilities around it.” (Kunzelman, 2022, p. 93) Seen this way, games can prepare us for tasks that the immaterial labor economy will perhaps ask us to perform in the future. While we might not be asked to pilot a war machine, the need to train ourselves to readily react (with our bodies) to the cybernetic interface to earn the most COAM and be able to buy the equipment

that is best suited to the future tasks eerily mirrors the way cognitive capitalism based on ever-evolving hardware and software (and proficiencies that are required of workers) is structured.

Margins of the Mech Allegory

An uneasy paradox then emerges. We can read the *Armored Core* assembly process as a self-experiential exercise within a game (echoing Guattari's notion of subject as constantly in flux). On the other hand, the game moulds and subjectivates us within specific parameters, while providing space for speculating on the nature of this very formation. If Kunzelman (2022, p. 86) mentions “naturalization” as a process through which game structures operate on us, at which point does naturalisation overtake the speculation and speculative potential get subsumed into the overarching logic of the simulation?

This is directly related to the limits of allegorical reading of the game. While providing a proxy body with interchangeable parts offers mechanical, affective, and rhythmic speculative potential, it also furthers a contentious model of the body as such—a body as a machine with interchangeable parts, a cybernetic modular system. A model that is far from neutral, moreover, in the case of the mech genre, which often seems to propagate the body/mind divide (the mind being the pilot, the body the robot). Not to mention that in real life, the phenomenological musings about embodiment and the ways we can modulate our own lived experience are very much circumscribed by issues of ableity and body politics. If Kunzelman mentions Wark’s critique of *Civilization III* (Firaxis Games, 2001), a strategy game that offers a “model of history as the intuition of algorithms and their consequences” (Wark, 2007 as cited in Kunzelman, 2022, p. 151), does not *Armored Core*, perhaps, offer a model, a body that is, at last, calculable and totally governable?

The fantasy of the titular “handler” Walter, the in-game boss and supposed owner of our war machine (and thus, us) would imply as much.

Naturally, I am not the first to observe a game that is at the same time an allegory of itself and/or which deconstructs its own workings towards the player. Openly critical games such as *BioShock* (2K Games & Irrational Games, 2007) or *Spec Ops: The Line* (YAGER & Darkside Games Studios, 2012) that underscore the disciplining nature of gameplay have now become part of the canonized history of the video game

medium. (Cole, 2023a) These games do not specifically address avatarhood; instead, they grapple with issues of power control and game violence, respectively. In some ways, a precursor to this chapter can be found in Apperley's & Clemen's (2015) analysis of *Assassin's Creed II* (Ubisoft, 2009) through the lens of avatarhood and politics. While they draw from a bit different conceptual apparatus than me, they nevertheless comment on how the game *Assassin's Creed II* is "itself an explicit narrative and allegory of the operations of biopolitical control." (Apperley & Clemens, 2015, p. 121) Drawing from Foucault, they see *Assassin's Creed II* "simultaneously as a self-reflexive critique *and* an extension of the biopolitical regime." (Apperley & Clemens, 2015, p. 121) Through the allegory of, in the context of game narrative, embodying quite literally a trans-historical avatar (our predecessor in a genetic lineage), *Assassin's Creed II*, despite being a big-budget, mainstream title, interrogates "the impact of alien technology upon anthropogenesis" while, at the same time, integrating this critique with "globalized post-industrial conditions of its own production, distribution and reception in such a way as to expose these conditions as contingent, yet simultaneously render[s] them absolute." (Apperley & Clemens, 2015, p. 122)

When we broaden our understanding of the avatar-as-interface as never confined to an isolated game, but as a part of a broader set of digital gaming practices, we can see this tension very clearly. *Armored Core*, seen via the previously sketched out idea of *avatar capital,* is deeply enmeshed within the logics of video game platforms that valorize players' actions through community functionalities like achievements, trading cards, screenshots, and more. Moreover, the game features an online mode where players can showcase their mechs in duels against other players, earning rank and score during these battles. Cynically understood, *Genshin Impact* and *Armored Core* have more in common than we would at first glance surmise: both modulate the player's body to affectively tie us to their respective worlds, albeit with different intensities and underlying business models. Both modulate our bodily reactions and rhythms to valorize our actions, subsuming the affect into its "commodity form". (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 189)

We can then view *Armored Core VI* both as a deconstruction of its own mode of production and its affirmation: in the similar way that, as Apperley & Clemens (2015, p. 122) highlight, "the very 'freedom' that the diegesis shows the avatar [of Assasin's Creed II] struggling for becomes indistinguishable from the total systemic control of

contemporary biopolitics." However, instead of biopolitics, where "patriarchal genetic inheritance comes to coincide with personal memory through the agency of inhuman technology", *Armored Core VI* seems to deal with cybernetic subjectivity, where human faculties become computable, augmentable, and controllable via machinic means, through simulation. (Crogan, 2011).

Through this cybernetic subjectivity, rising from the ideological effects of the body abstracted through the avatar-as-interface, we become enmeshed in complex power relations with avatar-based games. Just as the body of our avatar is dissected into constituent parts with various, mathematically described components and clearly readable attributes, we are subjected to the cybernetic logic of analyzability and modelability. This happens in-game, where our physical movements get broken down by code and algorithmic abstraction and translated into movements of our avatar. It is very reminiscent (albeit with a different modality) of the way our bodies are subjected to computational apparatuses outside of gaming every day. These include recognition software (such as gait recognition), various smart sensors that populate our homes and cities, as well as bodily data analytics we encounter in workplaces, supermarkets, and those used in marketing.

It would then seem that all avatar-based media contain within them a critical possibility, subdued or highlighted by different strategies, however much they might be devised as commodities. *Armored Core* or, for that matter, *Roblox* or *Fortnite* are both allegories of bodily existence as well as stand-ins for it, experientially letting us wander their worlds as if they were our own, through carefully modulated proxy bodies: with differing modalities of avatar-as-interface beholden to different machinic rhythms they require of our physical muscles and tendons. Indeed, I do not wish to prescribe what kind of video game embodiment is problematic and what kind is not: the goal of my analysis is to, hopefully, provide tools to reflect on the power avatars wield. Whether it's the new Darth Vader skin and a cool new dance in the premium battle pass in *Fortnite*, or a mech fantasy of *Armored Core*.

And, as the next chapter will hopefully chart, it is also through this interface that we can preliminarily plot our way out.

Interlude I: Cute and Animatic

While not a core part of my analyses, we cannot discredit the attendant contexts that surround both *Armored Core* and *Genshin Impact* due to their aesthetic choices.

Curiously, both games are indebted to vague genres/forms: general anime aesthetics in the case of *Genshin Impact*, and specifically mecha anime sensibilities in the case of *Armored Core*. These elicit different affects and leverage a different cultural genealogy that is directly tied both to their business models and (and perhaps, therefore) how avatar-as-interface functions. Colorful, cute *Genshin Impact* asks us to care about our approachable characters/avatars we gradually collect, presenting almost an aspirational world full of explorers' wonder. *Armored Core*, on the other hand, is heavy, overpowering, full of friction and violence. Narratively, our robotic embodiment is explained as (supposedly) involuntary confinement within a war machine in a near-apocalyptic setting where extractive interstellar corporations exploit everyone in their hunger for profit.

As the first two chapters attempted to demonstrate, ideology is always enmeshed with subjectivity—how ideology situates us within a social and material reality and undergirds our relationship to it. Obviously, this is not a new idea. There is a long-running strand that views culture as offering, invoking, and moulding differing subjectivities of its consumers. The same is true for games, which "simulate the normalized subjectivities of a global capitalist order—consumer, commander, commanded, cyborg, criminal—not to mention the rapid shedding and swapping between identities." (Dyer-Witheford & Peuter, 2009, p. 192) Similar arguments are made by Bailes (2019) or Kunzelman (2022).

We can then preliminarily sketch out what it would mean to view *Armored Core* and *Genshin Impact*, and especially their respective avatar embodiments and relations, as emblematic of the current structural era. While not exhaustive, I offer the following list, constructed following the previous analysis:

Genshin Impact:

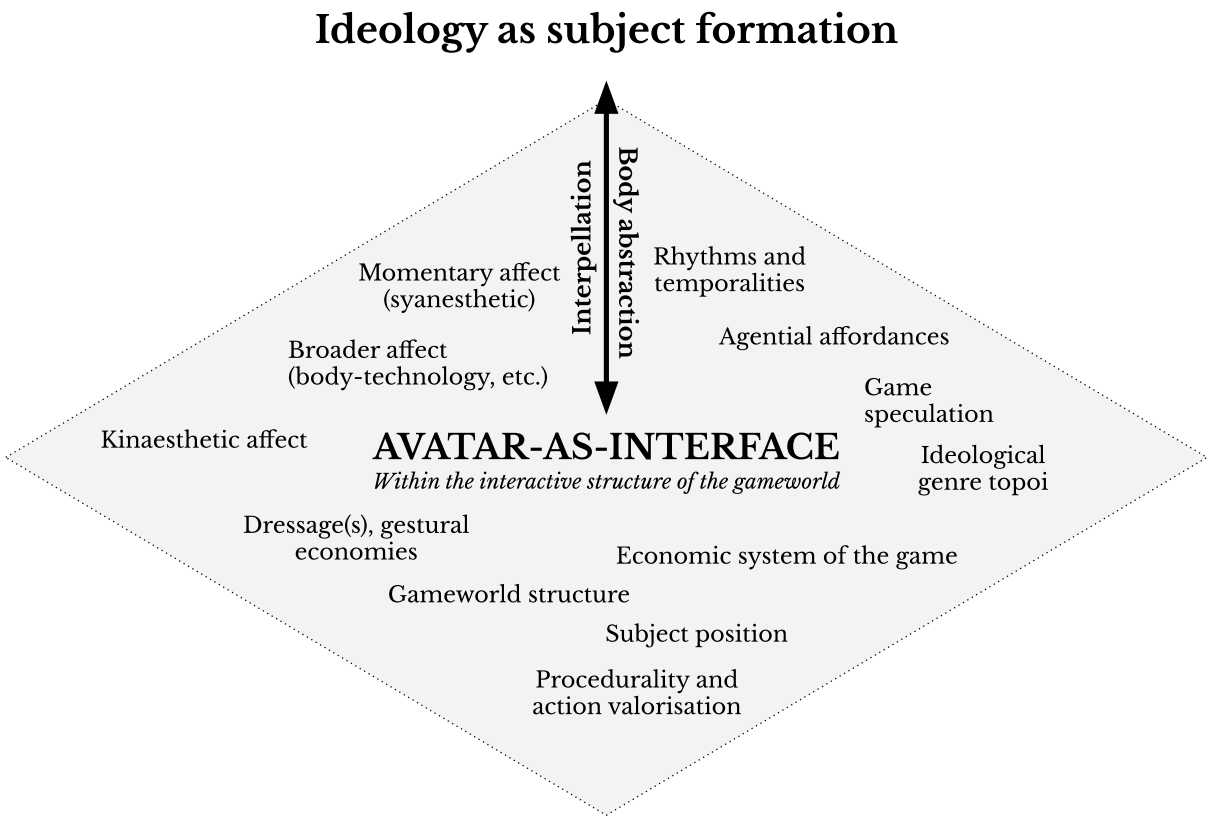
- Endlessly flexible subject position (ready for quick changes and alterations),
- managerial approach to embodiment and affect and relationships,

- free-roaming subject adaptable to any situation, yet circumscribed by the disciplinary apparatus (party system and free-to-play structure),
- illusion of narrative and algorithmic agency (character is the saviour of the world, but subject to many mechanisms),
- time-manager of limited capital accumulation rhythms,
- always-on subject ready to "monetize" their time,
- collector's affect (imbricated in gacha economy),
- predicated on a tension between playful unpredictability and predictability (lootbox odds x character advancement calculations),
- consumption as desirable for advancement (rare items, leveling items), accumulation of currencies,
- readiness to invest more (time, effort, money) into advancing,
- artificial temporal scarcity.

Armored Core:

- Experiential body with reconstituted with interchangeable properties (modular embodiment), limited only by capital (monetary funds in-game),
- cybernetic embodiment tied to the market, transhumanist fantasy of self-improvement via capital accumulation,
- adaptable/flexible body configuration in the service of precarious labour (narratively as well as mechanically),
- body discipline via synaesthetic pleasure and dressage,
- embodiment as always infused with technology and augmented by technical objects (machinic subjects),
- emphasis on physical dexterity and fast cognitive information processing,
- predicated on predictability (game missions as a puzzle x abilities),
- limited player narrative agency (story has very few decisions), framed as a parable of the contemporary real-life economy (freelancer).

There are important differences; yet, my analysis attempted to show that what unites these examples is the structurally functioning ideology of the avatar embodiment. We can chart this situation using the following diagram:



The resulting subject is formed by being interpellated by the game through the avatar-as-interface, an interface that abstracts the body by interactive means. We then become part of the interactive structure of the gameworld with its attendant complex of various push and pulls that modulate our interfacing with it: being-in-the-world (mechanisms of incorporation), procedurality (the concretisation[43]), rhythms and temporalities, habitual dressages and gestural

[43] Klevjer (2022, p. 140): "[C]omputer game environments integrate the explicit rules of a game system, through the principle of concretisation. This means that the structuring imperatives of the game system become translated or 'absorbed', as it were, into a world of playthings. It is this playable or ludic world that the avatar 'projects around itself'. Different kinds of bodies constitute different kinds of bodily spaces, and the body of the computer game avatar constitutes, by definition, a gameworld. Computer game environments integrate the explicit rules of a game system through the principle of concretisation. This means that the structuring imperatives of the game system become translated or 'absorbed', as it were, into a world of playthings. It is this playable or ludic world that the avatar 'projects around itself'.

economies, economic systems of the game (free-to-play model x premium model), gameworld structure (of the prescribed modes of relating, traversing, etc.), genre topoi (open-world RPG, mecha action shooter), agency (and affordances of the gameworld), affects (kinaesthetic, bodily, procedural, both minutiae when playing the game and those felt more broadly).

The mechanisms of bodily incorporation that are underway when we enter the avatar-as-interface that unifies our perception with our action and seemingly naturally extends our presence into the gameworld bring with them a slew of uneasy assumptions about natural and transparent embodiment. Klevjer problematizes this:

> Like cinema, the 3D avatar defines a subject-position that is perceptually imposed on the player. (…) [T]his subject-position corresponds to a particular type of 'apparatus', if you will, that has been designed—and is continually being designed—to secure for the player a sense of realistic transparency. (…) [T]he computer-simulated camera, which 'co-opts' us into relating to screen-projected synthetic spaces as real spaces, and which emphasises and exaggerates this paradox through various strategies of the 'Hyperreal'."

Here, the avatar's seeming transparency is situated in the broader lineage of media technologies. Klevjer goes as far as to hint at post-structuralist media theory (hyperreal), but we don't need to go that far to see that this immediate, multi-sensory incorporation into the avatar is far from neutral. The way the gameworld makes itself intelligible to us *has a structure* derived from the general genealogy of *ideology* of a given technology (3D interactive games), as it has over time evolved under various constraints and pressures.

Different kinds of bodies constitute different kinds of bodily spaces, and the body of the computer game avatar constitutes, by definition, a gameworld."

3. Embodied Counter-interpellation: *Death Stranding*, *Baby Steps*, and *Bad Corgi*

As I've established, I view the avatar body as an abstraction of the physical one, and every game is thus itself always already a metaphor for mediated embodiment as such. Avatar-as-interface is a device that is employed by games to channel this embodiment on the visceral, affective level: the game avatar is an abstraction made "concrete". Third-person games, by putting us at a distance (both affectively and formally) from the avatar's body, heighten this situation.

The first chapter described how we are interpellated through the avatar-as-interface to orient ourselves towards a non-neutral gameworld. The second then attempted to show that every avatar contains a reflective potential. Avatar-as-interface is both an ideological device and a site of negotiation. This last chapter will ask the question: What would it mean to negotiate the avatar-as-interface differently?

As we've seen, both in *Genshin Impact* and *Armored Core*, a body has undergone significant abstraction—and while both games deploy rhythms and gestures to modulate our physical bodies, the movements of our avatars in them remain neatly mapped onto hardware controls. This does not mean that the traversal of their worlds is trivial. However, these games *condense* a very complex idea of locomotion and body-control into particular aspects of their structure as a part of their *gameworld interface* in the service of a preferred gameplay experience.

To move a character in *Genshin Impact* means as little as touching the analog stick of a controller—the game code, physics engine, and animation system will take care of the rest. *Armored Core*'s movement set is considerably richer, containing boosts, jumps, and different movement types. Still, the abstraction of basic movement remains the same—whether it's bipedal or quadrupedal, whether it's heavy or light,

my avatar/mech is completely subjugated to my mechanical control: leveraging *embodied literacy* I have acquired during my gaming career.

Yet, as anyone can attest, moving one's body or controlling a vehicle like a car is far from trivial. Sure, there is a lot of kinaesthetic reflexes happening (especially in the case of smooth urban space), but as anybody who goes to hike in the woods can recognize is how complex simple act of walking can be: the need to synchronize the weight across both legs, to take into account not only our own body and its muscles, tendons and ligaments, but also any baggage we might be taking with us, the surface, elevation, wind, and much more.

Genshin Impact and *Armored Core* represent what we could call a *seamless embodiment.* One that, unless an effect such as a direct debuff is present during gameplay, provides a somewhat smooth experience of controlling our screen proxy.

In this final chapter, I want to focus on several games that problematize this industry-standardized way of approaching our avatars. While my goal has been to show the intricate ways even seamless embodiment produces ideological effects, following games represent either a purposeful subversion of industry logic or, at the very least, broaden the space for relating to our virtual bodies. Thus, they offer different critical modalities that can turn our attention towards the minutiae of modulations we undergo when playing games.

It will thus analyse three distinct games that in different ways subvert the typical expectations we have from game embodiment (hence, from the usual ways avatar-as-interface is deployed), making us aware of how the proxy body is constructed through abstraction, beholden to the typical ways power gets distributed between the game and the player. First, I will take a look at *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019), a big-budget title that nevertheless reframes what it means to inhabit an avatar in a game by employing unusually granular controls of the protagonists' physiques. I will then follow with *Baby Steps* (Bloch et al., 2025) an independent title that is both narratively and mechanically in conversation with ideas about the video game embodiment as such (and, perhaps, with *Death Stranding* too); lastly, I will focus on artistic game *Bad Corgi* (Cheng, 2016) that directly disrupts the presuppositions of mastery and control we are asked to internalize while controlling typical video game avatars. These games were picked not only due to my

personal affinities, but also because this selection represents differently situated approaches, spanning big-budget game production, more independent spheres, and, finally, artistic practice that operates within different constraints.

3.1 *Bad Corgi*

The menu screen greets you: a little, boxy dog rendered in sharp edges is jerkily, happily dancing with a disembodied, bright white shepherd's crook. The title "bad corgi" sits in the middle of the screen, continuously getting scrambled, forming nonsensical, vaguely homonymic phrases like "acrir dog", "acdic cog", or "bcd corgi". Below, a text invites us to "[t]ouch Corgi to Enter Corgi." Once you do (although I clicked, not touched, playing the game in desktop mode), the menu suddenly disappears, the dog starts running and the game informs me that "You possess Corgi." I click around, getting the feel of the controls, directing the dog in the desired directions, making it bark when I sometimes accidentally click directly on it instead of the ground. The free-roaming spirit of my dog avatar is nevertheless circumscribed by the commanding crook that keeps jumping after me, dragging me back whenever I steer too far away: either the game or the crook itself uttering, in red, exclamatory letters "Come back here!" I run over a bunch of shrubs, the game's "score" indicator falls at "-40% perfect" and the corgi's head enlarges. I try to change course and run back suddenly, but the avatar does not listen and, as if to be doubly sure, the cane tethers me to itself via a white link. A speedy sheep races towards me, then brakes, seemingly becoming a part of my "herd". "Another shrub", "-140% perfect", "Corgi displaced a shrub—so bad" announces in-game text. Judging from the only game icon in the UI, it's daytime. Suddenly, a flashing text appears. It reads "beyond control," and I lose any control over the dog: a whimsical sound effect plays when I try to click in vain, and nothing happens. Evening comes, the colour palette shifts into deep orange and then brownish tones. I lift my hand from my laptop's touchpad. The dog and the crook keep running in tandem, autonomously. Perhaps they don't need me, after all.

This is how my last session in *Bad Corgi* (Cheng, 2016) began. The (game) artwork was commissioned by Serpentine Galleries, and in it, various long-standing interests of its author, artist Ian Cheng, meet: virtual agents, whimsical, borderline ironic simulations, autonomously evolving environments, and cute beings. Described as a "little mindfulness app refusing to eradicate stress and anxiety", chaos is at the heart of *Bad Corgi*: the controlled, smooth experience is not the point.

While Bad Corgi is not published in the game section of Apple's *App Store* (instead listed under the "Health and fitness" section), it easily slides into our discussions about the digital environment. It features a 3D avatar and, despite a different control scheme, it thus implicitly and explicitly serves as a commentary on the way we embody technology and technology embodies us.

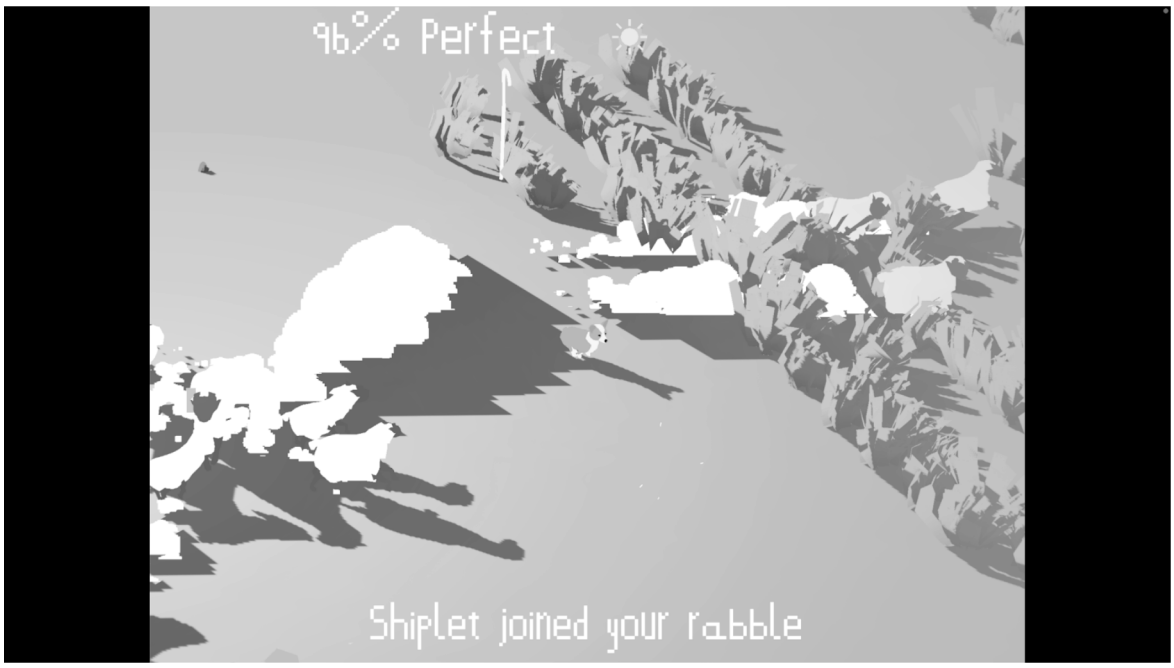


Fig. 12: Corgi from Bad Corgi, for a moment free from the crook's grip.

As hinted at in the second chapter, there is a long-standing tradition in critical theory, media theory, and game studies to discuss subjectivity in relation to cybertechnologies, rising from the powers of subjectivation that are channelled through digital media. This is tied to ideas of augmentation, co-constitutive with the assumed power of simulations: the tendency to blend reality and simulation in the hopes of better controlling reality, what Crogan (2011, p. xxiii) calls "Gameplay mode", described by Bogost (2012) as "the tendency to blend reality and simulation in the hopes of better controlling reality". This push (and pull) towards simulation brings with it numerous assumptions, dating all the way back into the early post-war period. Cybernetics posits that "governing would become a rational coordination of the flows of information and decisions that circulate through the social body." (Tiqqun, 2020, p. 30). As Garite (2003), Galloway (2006), Bogost (2010), and, of course, Crogan (2011) all hint at, games are ultimately implicated in this rationalizing process, whereby the world is re-interpreted by the algorithmic, cybernetic system to be malleable and

controllable. Through this lens, games such as *Genshin Impact* or *Armored Core* are emblematic micro-situations of the same outlook: with their neatly controllable characters that can act in the world with eerie clarity of purpose and information thanks to the augmented gameworlds they open in front of us, through their GUIs and the very landscapes full of signals to orient us through. All the while making us the malleable material as well, analysing and modulating our bodily gestures and affective reactions to re-subjectivize us: either to serve the free-to-play business model or to, perhaps, become cybernetic subjects ready to take governance of our bodies and flexibly participate in the capitalist economy, respectively.

Kunzelman & Lutz (2021) comment on Crogan's "Gameplay mode" specifically, when they take issue with the totalizing idea of it: technology, simulation, and war mutually reinforce each other, so that there is no outside. This echoes the reservations leveraged against Althusser's conception of all-encompassing ideology I discussed in the first chapter. What if, then, we can find a way to escape its grasp through artworks such as *Bad Corgi* (2016) that deliberately toy with the very structure of our affective relationship to cybernetics?

Cybernetic Critique as a Mischievous Dog

Let us then return to the description of 3D third-person avatar-based games from the introduction. There, I typified them as being characterized by *(kinetic) realism, xyz spatial orientation, seemingly natural(ized) perspective, body (realism), (cinematic) freedom, high (world) coherence,* and *hi-tech affect.* Bad Corgi arguably falls short in several of these characterizations from the start due to its constrained camera (which is still fixed in an overhead, "isometric" position relative to the dog) and the absence of a vertical axis of orientation. Nevertheless, the way it ties together the ideas and practices of control through the avatar warrants its inclusion. Instead of these categories, Ian Cheng's game can be characterized as (kinetically) non-realistic, a game with alienated perspective that distances us from the body that oftentimes wrestles our of our control, un-realistic in its body depiction (not only since we're controlling an animal, but also because it undergoes sudden body transformations), incoherent, chaotic world and low-tech affect coupled with minimal cinematic freedom, all the while the game taking control from players without warning.

To offer another typology, Apperley & Clemens (2015) list five defining traits of how avatars frame the gameplay experience: focalisation (of the player's experience),

embedding (the experience in a local context), integration (of the player within the gameworld), and programming (player's behaviour). Apperley & Clemens (2015, p.115) understand focalisation as a way characters' actions become our own, leading them to conclude that "all avatar-based digital games (...) are experienced through the quality of the performance of an avatar over which the player has control." Embedding is then used to draw attention to how every instantiation of the avatar-player relationship happens within a concrete individual context (social, economic, cultural, etc.). Apperley & Clemens (2015, p.115) use integration to describe how affect is integrated with cognitive intentionality and identification, a "reterritorialization of cerebrality itself through binding affect of action according to each game's specific constraints." This integration of affect with cognition is a crucial component of gameplay. Finally, programming is tied to the idea of training (in the sense of Lefebvre's dressage) enabled via avatar, a "continual modulations, modifications and monitoring of user retraining through the indefinite repetition of basic movements melded with serial dosing of affect in a graded hierarchy of internally ratified accomplishments." (Apperley & Clemens, 2015, p. 120) In most games, when we fail to play correctly, the game takes control away from us and disciplines us to try better to keep playing.

I have discussed these traits of avatar framing at length because we can now clearly see how *Bad Corgi* upends nearly all of them, or at the very least, reflects on their usual uses. Both focalisation and integration are deeply ambivalent: we are, quite literally, given control over corgi, only for it to be taken back at various times; the game addresses us, yet our freedom to act on that address is often very limited. The quality of performance of our corgi, which would enable us to situate ourselves within the (very unclear) fiction of the game, is not entirely our own, pointing towards the indelible margin of incompleteness of the player-avatar relationship, to the cracks within the avatar-as-interface, however empowering and totalising it might seem. The "gestural economy" of *Bad Corgi*, the affect that is being integrated with our cognition, is at best spasmic, interrupted as the game's algorithm pushes back against the player's desire to enact her agency. Thus, it makes us aware of the fact that the avatar is an interface (or, as Apperley & Clemens (2015) put it, the locus) of gameplay experience: one that we access from our situated context. When discussing localization, it is notable that *Bad Corgi* is not distributed through typical gaming channels, but instead via a wellness and "app" section of the *App Store,* and was devised by a contemporary artist funded by a contemporary art gallery. We can then

only assume that the context of the players of *Bad Corgi* will be perhaps a bit different than that of the other titles discussed here.

Directly related to cybernetic ideology outlined above is the idea of programming, a latent issue of many critics of video game (and digital) culture. *Bad Corgi* clearly aims to destabilize assumptions inherent in the app and game culture—even though it contains a score calculator, what exactly the continuously decreasing "-230% perfect" means remains opaque. After clicking the menu/daytime icon, we can open a special "statistics" page that lists "forecast", number of "shrub patches pushed", "all time bad" (mine is now "-1403"), and "life expectancy." Not only are these indicators apparently named ironically as a tongue-in-cheek nod to the usual parts of games/apps, but, notably, they do not seem to be tied to any rewarding/disciplining mechanism. There is no algorithm forcing us to try better or leave the game, no need to learn corgi's moveset and discipline our body to achieve an adequate score and move on to the next level. I understand these statistics less as game mechanics and more as affective, aesthetic objects that guide our reflection through play. At the same time, we are disciplined by the herder's crook, clearly enacting power over the corgi, the avatar, and, ultimately, us. But because this enactment of power is so explicit (highlighted by the tethering bond between the instrument and the dog), it never operates with the same level of naturalization as typical video game training does. The affective distance *Bad Corgi* generates through its aesthetics, nonsensical UI elements, and game mechanics leads to a productive critical relation towards the video game proxy body.

3.2 *Baby Steps*

Apperley (2010, p. 140) concludes that "while digital games are forms of training or dressage, it is important to acknowledge that while containing disciplinary elements, they also rely on creative, innovative, and unruly practices." There, he finds "a 'latitude' or 'margin" of action that is 'free within the limits set by the rules'". He calls this margin "counterplay", which "challenges the validity of models of play that suggest digital games compel the players to play according to encoded algorithms, which they must follow exactly to succeed. Instead, it opens the possibility of an antagonistic relationship between the digital game and player." (Apperley, 2010, p. 102)

While Galloway's counterplay is mainly related to subversive uses of a particular game artifact (an example that Apperley himself lists is modding), "where (...) player produces results that were otherwise unanticipated during the design process," (Apperley, 2010, p. 103), I believe we can understand it in a more broad perspective a set of gaming-related practices that go against the dominant forms of gaming with its unproblematized approaches to gameplay and the resulting ideological effects.

Apperley (2010, p. 103) mentions that "counterplay may leverage the situated" and "mobilize the gaming body, the hardware, people, and the spaces through which play is embedded and produced." This exposition of "material limits of digital games: the actions, actors, artificial intelligence, and objects of the virtual space" (Apperley, 2010, p. 103) can thus be seen not only as an intervention into a particular game, but also, we can view a game itself as such an intervention.

Keogh (2023), inspired by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, gives an account of the video game "industry" as a contested social field, subjected to a constant power struggle for canonizing certain media practices, while pushing others onto the edges. Video game industry, as a descriptive term, in Keogh's (2023) view, then serves to police who (doing what) is considered a game developer. It is a clear ideological power network that mediates any game maker's relation to the social body (of gaming community and at large), valorizing particular subjectivities (and subjectivating processes).

We can then view counterplay as a mechanism through which this process can be pushed against and, perhaps, renegotiated. If the entire social field of game development is contested, then creating games that purposefully deviate from the usual ways of doing things can be understood as a form of broad-sense counterplay.

Seen this way, both *Bad Corgi* and *Death Stranding* have counterplay potential and elements, albeit conjuring their critical potential in different ways: the first one leveraging its status as contemporary art piece and attendant subversive tradition, the second one using the blockbuster, big-budget form to deliver an ambiguous, critical message.

The last of the games I want to deal with in this chapter is *Baby Steps* (Bloch et al., 2025). And, interestingly, it treads on a social field somewhere between these two.



Fig. 13: In other games, a bridge would be trivial to pass. In Baby Steps, it is a considerable embodied challenge.

When the Proxy Body Fails to Obey

I have just fallen off a muddy slope. The avatar clumsily gets up, swearing and sighing. I look around, taking in my surroundings to plan my route. I guess I'll attempt to go up the mountain once again, and maybe this time, I'll be able to cross a gap between two wooden poles where I stumbled and fell all the way back here. I position my camera at a semi-overhead angle and press the left trigger button on my gamepad. My avatar pulls up his leg. I move the left analog stick while holding down the button, then let go. The avatar takes a step forward with one foot. I repeat, very slowly, the same for the right leg. Quickly, my muscle memory and tacit understanding of the game's control scheme kick in. I repeat my movements, my avatar is staggering, but keeps walking forward with big strides. Then I hit a larger undulation in the terrain than I expected and fall to the ground. I try again, taking the new terrain into account as I put my legs forward. I get the hang of it, but fail again once I reach a bunch of rocks. Rocks demand a very different approach. I manage to climb up four, until I stumble again, my avatar uttering "watch it" as it falls down the slope. The rocks demand a very different momentum and force me to alter the almost naturalised coordination between my triggers and analog stick. It will take me ten minutes and roughly twenty falls, but finally, I manage to crawl up the pile of stones: a path! I follow the path, getting comfortable with a well-structured path. Then I reach a place where the path intersects with muddy terrain, remnants of a stream that fell through a

while ago. Disturbed by this possibility, I press one of the buttons too soon or too late and stumble. The figure in a dirty onesie slips, sliding down the muddy path, ending where I began. Time for another attempt.

In *Baby Steps*, we play as Nate. In a short intro cinematic, we learn that he is 35, and, judging from items scattered across his room, he is not doing so well. With a bong on a coffee table, a delivery pizza in front of a glowing screen, Nate seems to be a satirical depiction of a reclusive gamer or media consumer. We hear his family complaining about his complacency and a lack of "discipline." We can only assume Nate is spending most of his time gaming on a couch.

At the start of the game, Nate is suddenly sucked into the television screen, presumably entering a virtual world. Appearing in a damp, unfamiliar cave, he washes ashore from an undercurrent and is forced to navigate his surroundings and figure out what has happened. We take control of Nate from a 3rd person over-the-shoulder perspective.

The game does not provide us with any clues as to where we actually are or what our grand purpose is; the only tooltip on the display tells us to move. And it is the avatar movement control scheme that is the reason why I chose to include *Baby Steps* in this study. Unlike the majority of 3rd person games, *Baby Steps* forces us to control each of Nate's legs with unusual granularity. While ordinarily, the left analog stick is used to point the avatar in a direction we want it to move, in *Baby Steps*, nothing is as expected: if you try the same approach, Nate quickly falls face down, groaning. Instead, players need to alternate between the left and right shoulder buttons of a controller (so-called triggers), each lifting Nate's left and right leg. The left analog stick is then used to control how far the leg is supposed to stretch and in which direction. Letting go of the trigger will cause the leg to come down, with Nate putting his weight into the foot. Making a simple step is now not a trivial push of a button: instead, it is, in itself, a mechanical obstacle that forces us to learn an almost entirely new way of relating to the gameworld. Initially, just walking in a straight line seems like an arduous task. Slowly, one internalizes the weird control scheme and, possibly, figures out how the camera's position interplays with Nate's movements—that is, until a new kind of terrain (a small hill, a rock, a slippery mud, a slope, and so on) appears, demanding a new approach.

This process of *training* challenges the typical expectations we have for a third-person, somewhat open world game, rendering our "embodied literacy" (Keogh, 2018) to a large extent irrelevant. For example, in *Baby Steps*, terrain constantly reminds us of its presence. Once I slowly learned to move around on a flat surface, the game introduced obstacles. In other games, a log lying across a forest path is a trivial challenge, usually consisting of pressing a single button (for jump or climb). In *Baby Steps*, it forces you to adapt to a new problem gradually, failing many times before solving it. The same goes for a mountain that slowly opens up in front of Nate, after he emerges from the initial cave, with its steps, winding paths, boulders of varying height, slippery surfaces underneath water streams, and changing elevation. All of this tests our newly acquired knowledge again and again. The gameworld in *Baby Steps* presents quite a lot of friction, and even a simple movement is (at least initially) marked by numerous falls, failures to ascend (or descend), comical slips, grunts, Nate's swearing, and a dynamic soundtrack reacting with gusto to the incapability of the virtual body we inhabit. Different "patterns of attention" (Kalmanlehto, 2023, p. 7) emerge when controlling Nate, where simply walking through the world without paying attention to the control scheme is (at least at the beginning) nearly impossible. Faltering in one's attention could result in a mistake that, in later stages of the game, can significantly set back the player's progress.

Baby Steps can be (and, judging from some interviews, wishes to be) read as a philosophical meditation, a figurative "baby steps" towards "getting a handle on life." (Farokhmanesh, 2023). Yet, the titular "baby steps" can be understood quite literally as undermining the dressage players who picked up the title presumably attained during their gaming careers.

At the same time, the game comments on how the physical body is abstracted to fit into gameworlds. Not only it implicitly questions all the assumptions about movement that go into an ubiquitous control scheme of 3rd person games, but by focusing so much on the viscerality of the Nate's bodily experience (audible falls, meticulously sounded thuds, his satirical commentary, dirtying clothes), it highlights how utterly fictional nature of in-game embodiment is even in this game, that is arguably, quite complex when it comes usually simplified mechanics such as walking. Nate repeatedly falls and rises without a scratch or injury (even after hitting hard rocks), and he never tires. Similarly, Nate could solve many of the obstacles in front of him if only he used his hands or jumped. The game does not contain such options.

Only at specific points are we allowed to pick up objects (like a funny hat). It is as if the game ostensibly wore the structure of its gameworld on its sleeve: gesturing at the "illogic" and constructed nature.

The metaphor of the cave, present both in the image of Nate's gamer's room and a literal cave from which emerges at the game's beginning, is a similarly potent one. Narratively, it reflects the idea of overcoming the confines of a "man-cave", but also could be put into a conversation with Wark (2007) and her deployment of the "cave" as a critical concept:

> "Now you are an enlightened gamer, you see how the world beyond the games of The Cave seems like an array of more or less similar caves, all digital, each an agon with its own rules, some arbitrary blend of chance and competition. And beyond that? Not much. The real has become mere detritus without which gamespace cannot exist, but which is losing, bit by bit, any form or substance or spirit or history that is not sucked into and transformed by gamespace." (Wark, 2007, p. 13)

Wark's is a kind of reverse Plato's cave, where instead of shadows mistaken for reality, we, within video games, see clearly that the reality is game-like. Viewed this way, *Baby Steps* would draw attention to how the body is disciplined and subjugated by ideological forces across the cultural realm, including, naturally, other video games such as those discussed in the first two chapters. By alienating us from the expected game experience, *Baby Steps* establishes an affective relationship with the avatar-as-interface that is not based on (illusory) mastery, but one in which the interface and its attendant processes become evident with every step.

Baby Steps seems keen on enhancing the supposed viscerality of the experience—for example, in one of the early portions of the game, we meet another character who asks Nate if he has a map. During the dialogue, when the other person unfolds the map in front of Nate, a UI element appears in the lower left corner of the screen, featuring landmark icons and directional arrows, as is customary in this style of video game interface. Typically, this animation would signify that we would have a map at our disposal from now on—but in *Baby Steps,* the animation quickly hides the map again alongside a whimsical sound effect. To conclude an awkward conversation, Nate says he's an "elite climber" and that he doesn't need the map. *Baby Steps* seems

to nod towards what Jørgensen (2013, p. 148) calls "integrated", an approach to video game interface design that underplays (or, like *Baby Steps*, nearly completely omits) overlays and uses supposedly more "natural" ways of communicating game information, embedding it within the worldspace instead.

While Jørgensen (2013, p. 148) does not see, in the last instance, a big difference between these approaches to game information, the ones she calls integrated and superimposed,[44] the map vignette attests to the way *Baby Steps* uses the language of an "integrated" gameworld interface design to comment on itself. The walking mechanics and minimal interface seem to suggest an in-game commentary: one that draws attention to the fact that this supposed "most natural" way of interacting with the game is, indeed, a fallacy: and Nate's and ours clumsiness is what is the result when we wish to strip the interface (including the avatar) of the layers of abstraction it offers.

The gaming body (ours and Nate's) is being mobilized inside the virtual (and, quite real) cave. When we play *Baby Steps* and reflect on its relation to the wider gaming world, we "counterplay", that is, explore "the material limits of digital games: the actions, actors, artificial intelligence, and objects of the virtual space." (Apperley, 2010, p. 103) While we need to be dressaged to progress in *Baby Steps*, due to the subversion of gaming principles, it is, I'd argue, a reflective dressage and training: the "margin" of "meaningful flexibility in action" between the encompassing rules of the game(s) and our agency is found not within a single artifact, but in the changed relation we attain towards the medium as whole. It is a *relational counterplay*, whose chief channel of communication is the avatar-as-interface.

By playing *Baby Steps*, we engage in a "form[s] of creative and adaptive practices, establishing new forms of digital game play inside, and tangential to, the coded limits of the game space." (Apperley, 2010, p. 144) We become differently constituted gaming subjects, re-interpellated by Nate's one-suited body, reflective of our own gaming situation.

[44] As discussed previously, for her, the gameworld itself is a part of the (game) interface, a part of player-game information systems.

3.3 *Death Stranding*

There's an inherent conflict at the heart of blockbuster post-apocalyptic delivery guy simulator *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019). And I don't mean the one that ravages the fragmented, transformed landscape of the fictional USA, which ultimately turns into a struggle for the survival of the whole mankind: there is a deep friction in game systems and narrative, one between player's dressage and what seems to be a criticism of it; between the meticulous attention to abstracting human body, while simultaneously disciplining it via in-game rewards.



Fig. 14: Main character Sam navigating through the post-apocalyptic landscape of Death Stranding.

In many ways, *Death Stranding* delves into similar themes and allows for reflection on similar structural aspects of the video game experience, as seen in *Bad Corgi* and *Baby Steps*. While the game's story is famously convoluted and multi-layered, in the simplest terms, you are asked to deliver packages from point A to point B, across a hostile landscape littered with spectral beings as well as (and for my purposes, more importantly) many environmental obstacles and hazards. Upon its release, *Death Stranding* was described as the "most advanced walking simulator ever" (Frushtick, 2019), since the crux of the gameplay is, indeed, in the traversal of the landscape itself, making deliveries of materials, medicines, souvenirs, or even bodies. In this

third-person game, players take on the role of Sam Porter Bridges, a member of a special caste of “porters,” while the rest of the population hides underground in fear of the toxic landscape and its inhabitants.

The reason *Death Stranding* is cheekily associated with the “walking simulator” genre[45] is how the game models the movement of the human body itself through our interactions with the avatar. First, players need to arrange items to be delivered on Sam’s suit: in the central black compartment and, if required, in additional slots on thighs and arms. There is no overlaying “inventory” interface: everything Sam takes with him (including weapons and tools) has a physical presence and needs to be accounted for. Each piece of equipment or package has a specific weight and size, which affects the balance of the avatar’s body. In a lot of games, player’s inventory is limited by a simple number of items (*World of Warcraft*; Blizzard Entertainment, 2004), or their abstracted 2D shape (*Resident Evil: Village;* Capcom, 2021), or perhaps their nominal weight counted against a limit (*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*; Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), in *Death Stranding* these items take on a physical presence with “realistic” physics.

The importance of arranging your cargo correctly is evident once you set foot into the game’s rocky landscape. The way the cargo is arranged directly influences how easy or how hard it is to control the avatar's movement. With a heavier burden, players have to keep their balance in check by moving at a certain speed and holding special buttons (left and right shoulder buttons on a controller in a default scheme) to balance Sam’s body to the left or right; additionally, and crucially, they gotta be mindful of the terrain they are moving on. Using an in-game scanner, they can ascertain the properties of the path before them. While grass usually presents a minor obstacle, gravel is noticeably harder to move. Climbing up or moving down a slope, across rivers (with various flow momenta), and many other activities further complicate the avatar’s movement.

Another example is walking itself. While, usually, games (including *Genshin Impact* and *Armored Core*) present the player with a simple binary choice between “walking” and

[45] Originally used as a mocking descriptor for typically first-person games such as Dear Esther (The Chinese Room, 2012), with a focus on exploration and, quite literally, walking around the gameworld with little to no dynamic action. It was subsequently accepted by the community and game distribution platforms. (Clark, 2017)

"running" (or boosting, sprinting, etc.), pushing on the controller's left stick in *Death Stranding* smoothly and gradually alters the speed at which Sam Porter Bridges is moving.

Where most games present players with a somewhat unobstructed way the movements of their hands translate into characters' movement, *Death Stranding* highlights the contingency of this abstraction. It turns it into the basic building block of the gameplay. While *Genshin Impact* contains a climbing mechanic (almost any vertical surface in the game can be climbed, gradually depleting stamina meter) and *Armored Core* limits player's movement by the fuel available (limiting hovering time, dashing time and boost time) and tinkers with weight and overall style of the robot, the basic movement is still very abstracted: in short, players don't have to take detailed notice of how avatar's body interacts with its environment and how exactly the movement of their fingers translates into various parts of the character's body. *Death Stranding* highlights it.

Highlighting the Post-apocalyptic Abstraction

By making us aware of the confluence of our own bodily gestures and the avatar's gestures, *Death Stranding* draws attention to the way bodily abstraction works within video games and to the avatar-as-interface itself. The game's fiction and auxiliary game activities likewise emphasize the role of corporeality within its gameworld. Not only can we prompt Sam to shower or go to the toilet, but his bodily fluids (blood, urine, etc.) are used as weapons against in-game enemies. The role and politics of the body are further elevated when we learn that Sam is averse to human-to-human touch, often preferring to keep his distance. Coupled with game mechanics, the resulting affective bond we have towards the virtual Sam seems to draw attention to the aspects of bodily experience that are often glossed over by video games.

The role of technological augmentation of the physical body (akin to the allegory of *Armored Core*) is heightened as players progress through the game, unlocking various vehicles, exoskeletons, boots, ladders, ropes, and other tools/machines to enhance their delivery work. Additionally, a crucial part of the gameplay is the scanner (called Odradek), an overlaying UI that guides players through the post-apocalyptic USA, echoing Jørgensen's (2013) discussions about the gameworld as an interface and the inseparability of gameplay and the technical scaffolding that enables player agency.

Yet, “the tensions and ambiguity in digital play between creative practice and training” (Apperley, 2010, p. 8) are still very much present in *Death Stranding*. While the aforementioned emphasis on body-avatar relation can indeed be reflective and fruitful, we can nevertheless not discount the way the avatar’s movement (and, therefore, the player’s) is valorized via in-game mechanics. Upon each delivery, the player is rewarded with “likes” according to the path taken, the condition of the cargo (directly related to how well the player traverses the terrain since cargo can get damaged, for example, when slipping from a slope or while in a river), and several other factors. The player is then awarded a rank (A-S), and her performance counts toward the personal porter profile and statistics, which describe her delivery style. Altering one’s playstyle (and, therefore, cognitive and bodily orientation) is necessary to succeed. Despite offering a novel gestural economy, *Death Stranding* nevertheless still dressages (or, as Apperley, 2010, calls it, trains) players and then rewards them. They are interpellated through the avatar (locus of the agency and orientation in the world) and take on the subjectivity of a porter within a simulated landscape.[46]

Curiously, the game narrative affirms this ambiguity. In the holographic messages and e-mails we find throughout the game, we learn about the way the reward mechanisms consisting of likes can induce unhealthy affective relationships—the game seems to be obviously commenting on social media (Barker, 2019) and perhaps even on its own status as a digital artifact participating in such an affective economy. Meta-referentially, *Death Stranding* also seems to ironically reflect its own gameplay: one of the adversary factions in the game, the so-called M.U.L.E.S, who, as one of the in-game documents states, suffer from “delivery dependence syndrome”, addicted to the feeling of successfully delivering cargo, and being rewarded for it. They are not especially hostile, but will attempt to seize the cargo and store it, unable to stop delivering even while it serves no practical purpose and instead actively disturbs the fraught life within the game’s fictions.

Apperley (2010, p. 102) writes that “the relationships between players and digital games oscillate between compulsion and adaptation, training and practice.” In other words, there’s a tension between “the part of life that is neither work nor leisure, but even so is dominated by concerns that are not necessarily the individuals own” and

[46] Many have commented on the intersection of the game and contemporary service economy (House, 2020), including the eerie parallels the game’s release offered to the reality of pandemic lockdown (Stanton, 2022).

"process of actualizing the human being" as well as "disciplining the body through repetition and development, accumulation, and deployment of skills by the worker", respectively. (Apperley, 2010, p. 42) *Death Stranding* seems to exemplify this oscillation, whereby it represents an allegory or work (delivery) that enforces certain "gesture, gait, stature and composure" (Apperley, 2010, p. 42), which nevertheless produces self-actualizing affect. To put it differently, the game employs similar mechanisms to the ubiquitous gamified rewards within immaterial labour (or cognitive capitalism), while approaching the genre of a third-person semi-open-world game from a novel, critical angle.

Death Stranding represents perhaps the most "mainstream" kind of reflective game from those described in this chapter, bringing counterplay into the triple-A sector. It pairs high production values with what we can understand as methods of counterplay: it forces us to re-evaluate our embodied literacy and our subject position in relation to the gameworld. Stripped of the ease of traversal so ubiquitous in mainstream gaming, the gameplay of *Death Stranding* reminds us that the ways of corporeality and player-avatar-gamerworld relations are not self-evident. Moreover, the gameplay of *Death Stranding* has a relatively slower, reflective tempo, and the game's narrative explicitly comments on corporeality and the pleasurable feedback loop of digital media. Thus, the game creates a noticeably different affective relation to the post-apocalyptic terrain and our avatar itself.

3.4 Games to Avatarially Fail With

Most 3D video game avatars are predicated on mastery and control: "Any kind of consistent movement can be integrated or 'absorbed' by the avatar, and incorporated by the player as second nature. (Klevjer, 2022, p. 163). After mastering the demanding combat of *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (FromSoftware, 2019), some equate the experience to playing a piano (Geller, 2022). This is possible because the ways we operate video game avatars are both habitual on the level of tacit knowledge, and they follow "standardized" industry forms: we approach the parry mechanic in souls games that enables us to play *Sekiro* with the existing knowledge (and, perhaps, proficiency) from many other games in which we parried similarly.

The games I describe in this chapter toy with these industry expectations. We can understand them, to paraphrase Anable (2018), as *avatars to fail with.* When we first

encounter them, we expect their worlds and avatars to behave the way we are used to. However, they quickly subvert these expectations when they force us to reckon with an avatar that has seemingly its own agency (*Bad Corgi*), a much more detailed simulation of avatar movement on a surface than is usual (*Death Stranding*), and offer a fundamentally different level of bodily abstraction than expected (*Baby Steps*). Anable (2018, p. 104) writes: "What if, through video games, the feelings associated with failure were put to different ends? Might that experience have some affective and sociotechnological significance that extends beyond the context of our play?"

The affect of failure is directly opposed to presumed mastery. When we fall and fall again in *Baby Steps*, we are forced to reckon with our own body that lacks the tacit, embodied knowledge we expect it to have towards the video game in front of us. When the corgi in the *Bad Corgi* disobeys and takes our control, we are taken aback by the cybernetic system that de-centers our human agency. When Sam in *Death Stranding* falls because he's overburdened, and we did not manage to plan our trek across a river properly, we feel alienated from the usual avatar incorporation. In other words, *avatar-as-interface stutters* as we have to re-adjust to the new demands it makes on our bodies.

Though she deploys it in a bit different context, I find Anable's understanding of failure as ultimately productive, reflective force persuasive: "The aesthetics of failure [in the discussed] games speak to the sociohistorical context of failure and also to our yearning for different relationships with our machines and their sensual capacities." (Anable 129, p. 129) What we understand as a failure is always predicated on our previous understandings of what entails success; the failure (to control an avatar) always necessarily re-orients our relationship to the technologies in front of us. In the most reflective form, this can help us re-negotiate our relationship to the medium of video games (and its emotional texture) in a new way.

Transparency and Counter-gaming

This new relationship resists the imperatives of transparency we often associate with the 3D world. As Rehak (2003, p. 122 as cited in Işığan, 2013, p. 42) states that "screen spaces such as interfaces are 'ideological, they work to remove themselves from awareness, seeking transparency—or at least inobtrusiveness—as they channel agency into new forms'" Albeit with different levels of abstraction, actual/virtual body complex tends to obfuscate its own workings through various means. Games like *Bad*

Corgi, *Baby Steps* or *Death Stranding* draw attention to the avatar-as-interface again, making us aware of the interface that in other titles recedes into the background, and its ideological function is reified by pointing towards the body of the player and testing it. Instead, the body becomes the primary focus of the game from a mechanical and affective point of view. Suddenly, the assumed seamless subjective position of "I" in the gameworld is not possible, as we have to grapple with new bodily situations: of avatars that are clumsy, that force us to re-learn new ways of relating to the gameworld, or those that are, ultimately, uncontrollable at all. These games draw attention to the fact that bodily configurations, body schemas, and gestural economies are constituting factors of the whole experience, that is, to the avatar-as-interface through which we access the gameworld itself.

Işığan (2013, p. 53) also talks about the "ludic subject", the player, as standing either outside (of the game) or inside of it, constantly oscillating between these two states, unable to distinguish where is where. While, in Isigan's view, all games scramble outside and inside in this way, these critical titles do it in a very clear way by demasking the abstraction that ordinarily takes place unseen.

I have found a potential for counterplay within some of these games. An older concept, that counterplay is derived from, applies here as well: Galloway's (2006, p. 124) "countergaming". While a lot has been written about Galloway's overall theory of game algorithms, he very clearly equates countergaming with the "critique of gameplay itself" or what he calls "radical action" as opposed to the "gamic action" (Galloway, 2006, p. 125). Countergaming is focused on the act of playing (the mechanical), and, however untenable this dichotomy ultimately becomes, it points towards important aspects of the subversive potential of the mentioned games: they do so by manipulating the game interface itself.

Media, such as games, "play a key role in keeping hegemonic equilibrium; it is here that hegemony is produced, reproduced, and transformed." (Cassar, 2013, p. 346). They are also "grounds where an ideological warfare is fought between different social groups" (Cassar, 2013, p. 349), sites of struggle and negotiation. If games are places where "players can physically and intellectually embody, reject, or doubt ideological stances" (Cassar, 2013, p. 350), we can view the titles mentioned above as opening up space for such negotiation and rejection. Arising from various material conditions and varying permutations of the mode of production, they offer an

embodied intervention that draws attention to the ways ideological stances get inscribed and reproduced through the avatar-as-interface, the relation between our avatars and our gamer bodies.

Interlude II: The Bodily Other or the Power of an (Absent) Avatar Horror

In the afterword to Klevjer's book, Günzel, Sternagel & Mensch (in Klevjer, 2022, p. 221) write: "Our bodies are extended to the displayed field and experience the animation [of the avatar] as something *other." (*emphasis mine). The otherness of the virtual body can be directly related to the idea of the abstracted body I laid out before and attempted to elucidate in this chapter. The fact that the body we inhabit is a facsimile of the human body cannot be disregarded. The body might be idealized or degraded, yet it always acts as a word kinaesthetic, agential mirror of ourselves—our subjective double. In this last intermission, I'd argue that 3D avatar bodies, most notably those that are humanoid (or human-like), can also be understood through the psychoanalytic lens of the *abject* as understood by Kristeva (1982).

I write this interlude not to provide a definitive psychoanalytic account of the avatar, as that is beyond the scope of my thesis. Yet, I find this particular trajectory of inquiry fruitful and complementary to the game studies' corpus I already made use of: a perspective that interprets avatars as deeply implicated with questions of subjectivity and subject formation, one that finds particular resonances with Althusser's theory of ideology.[47] This part is thus implicitly as much a discussion of the possible avenues for further research as an attempt to broaden the thesis's existing theoretical perspectives.

This abjectness is present in all previous cases discussed, found in various ways, our proxy agency gets mediated through the constrained avatar. The ideological, procedurally affective structure makes its demands upon the mirror-body, making us painfully aware of the fact that when inhabiting a gameworld through an avatar, we are not free-acting subjects, but also partially objects upon which the game exerts its power. The movements, animations, and pleasures invoked by traversing the

[47] This is attested to by Keever (2022), who discusses Althusser's ideology in nearly psychoanalytic terms, using similar language to Kristeva, such as "void" to describe a place from which the subject emerges through interaction with technical (and other) objects.

gameworlds spring forth from our interaction with the game, but, ultimately, are not ours: the constructedness of the corporeal experience of the game always lurks in the background of the game experience.

Creating Avatarial Mirrors

So-called character creation screens in various games are often subjects of fan discussions, from sharing the resulting characters to exchanging “recipes” for recreating celebrities or characters from other media and/or evaluating the granularity with which the given game enables one to tweak their avatar.

There are, of course, important considerations regarding the role character creators play as part of role-play (Shang, 2024) or gender representation. (Iantorno & Consalvo, 2023) I am more interested in the character creator as a typical avatar-related form in the context of the process of abstracting a human body, which underpins a large number of avatars. Let’s take a typical character creator from *Elden Ring* (FromSoftware, 2022). Upon selecting a character class (warrior, sorcerer, etc.), players can either quickly alter their character's default visage using premade templates or they can utilize the full range of the character creator’s options. The categories that players can tweak include body type, hair, eyebrows, facial hair, eyelashes, eyes, skin features, cosmetics, tattoo/mark/eyepatch, and an especially detailed section dedicated to face features. There, one can alter facial balance, forehead, brow ridge, eyes, nose ridge, nostrils, cheeks, lips, mouth, chin, and jaw. Each option typically includes several sub-sections where players can alter their character in a very detailed way. In the case of *Elden Ring*, the depth afforded by the character creator led to the creation of dedicated communities and websites (like /r/SoulsSliders community on Reddit).

Yet, this is but just one example of a contemporary character creator, a ubiquitous function, especially in the action RPG genre to which *Elden Ring* belongs. It is also a mainstay of the “souls-like” genre, already present in the genre-defining *Demon’s Souls* (FromSoftware, 2009) and further gradually refined by the *Dark Souls* series (FromSoftware, 2011).

Irrespective of their particular feature set, character creator perhaps most clearly represents a tool for *representational abstraction*[48] of the human body. When creating an avatar, whether our lookalike or purely fantastical, we are confronted with a human body that is dissected into various building blocks of the character creator system: whether it's the color of eyes, protrusion of the forehead, or deepness of cheekbones and however detailed any character creator is, we are implicitly also confronted with a *limit* of such digital abstraction. We perhaps encounter what Bratton (2021) calls "inverse uncanny valley," where it is the human (body) that is subjected to datafication and abstraction.

The Ideology of the Clean Avatar Body

One of the aspects of bodily experience that gets abstracted and, most of the time, reduced by games is metabolism, or, more concretely, metabolic processes. From the analysed games, only two (*Death Stranding, Baby Steps*) even openly acknowledge the processes of urination and defecation, with only one making them somewhat integral to gameplay: not only you can go to the toilet in *Death Stranding* (prompting a short, sanitized cut-scene), but main characters' bodily fluids become weapons, turned into grenades and bullets against otherworldly enemies. Yet, for all the kinaesthetic verisimilitude, such metabolism is something that is only scarcely hinted at or depicted.

Kristeva's (1982) conception of the *abject* is of use here. In her conception, abject (as a noun and as an adjective) both destabilizes our self-conception (as seemingly cultural beings), showing where the disciplining symbolic order tears apart to reveal, coming from the outside of the supposedly self-contained self. In a psychoanalytic fashion, Kristeva traces the *abject* to the horror of being separated from the mother. For our needs, an important passage is the one where Kristeva equates abjection with all things related to physical decay, metabolic processes that sustain life and yet are shunned away by the human culture, deemed unclean and repulsive: "refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being." (Kristeva 1982, p. 3)

[48] I emphasise the representational aspect here because the way characters in these types of games look typically does not influence the gameplay, animation set, and so on.

Interestingly, Klevjer (2022, p. 208) writes that "the world of the avatar may be grotesque and 'subversive' in some sense, but the body of the avatar is intact, sovereign and self-contained." There are certainly gradations to how distorted our avatars can be (especially in horror games), and there are numerous discussions about games such as *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015) and *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011), focusing on their existential themes, cosmic horror motifs, and so forth. Yet, however gruesome these games can be, they shun from showing anything too vulgar or excessive when it comes to aspects of abjecthood relating to bodily functions. The avatar might be situated in a world governed by sophisticated physics simulation, but this body abstraction process scarcely reaches into the abject metabolic. It would, therefore, not be unfair to suggest that when Kristeva (1982, p. 17) writes about "the various means of *purifying* the abject—various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art," we can view the contemporary 3D avatar as a continuation of this purifying lineage. Avatar seemingly appropriates, *hypermediates* the body, while shedding away nearly all that could be equated with "bodily and sensory vulgarity and success that come to be associated with the forces of the pre-modern, the medieval or the bourgeois unconscious." (Klevjer 2022, p. 207). Avatar becomes a mediating force for the ideology of "civilized" body cleanliness. The ambivalence becomes apparent when, for example, the avatar enables me to re-live aspects of my chronically ill self and interpersonal struggle[49], while reproducing the hierarchy of permissible motifs related to the bodily (the metabolism). I view this sanitisation of the virtual body as a fruitful avenue for potential future research.

[49] For an essayistic account of how avatar play can map onto interpersonal gender violence, see Bee (2015). For a comprehensive discussion of avatar body pleasure and erotics, see Patterson (2020). Yet, even from these arguably enlightening perspectives, the abject is strangely absent.

Conclusion and Discussion

The in-game camera trembles with my every step, as my heavy-plated boots rumble on the steel floor of the derelict city. An epic orchestral soundtrack plays as I flex my larger-than-life muscles (pressing the left analog stick to run), jump forward (pushing the A button) into action, and quickly kill the first, insect-like enemy. It disintegrates into a firework of gore, my chainsword revving as it tears alien flesh with superhuman might that my avatar can muster.

I played through *Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine 2* (Focus Home Entertainment, 2024) as I was finishing this thesis: a game set in a well-known universe of Warhammer 40,000, where humanity is ruled by authoritarian, arguably clerofascist government whose elite forces are the titular space marines: superhuman, genetically-engineered soldiers taller and much more powerful than ordinary human, conditioned into hating other races of this "grimdark" universe, labeled as xenos or heretics in the game parlance.

As a 3rd person action game, *Space Marine 2* is keen on emphasizing the raw strength my character wields (both thanks to its enhanced constitution and technologically miraculous combat suit): each push of an in-game button, each lunge to avoid enemy projectile, each shot from my rifle that is loaded with explosive shells, each parry of enemy attack is a part of an synaesthetic pleasure spectacle. I have been playing the game for some time, so I know what each signal of the UI means: red marks an attack I can only dodge, blue ones that can be countered, allowing me to follow with a quick combo, sending my chainsword forward with superhuman speed, dealing heavy damage. In the case of lesser enemies, a well-timed counter starts an animation of my supersoldier catching them mid-air, crushing them to the ground, pinning them with a boot, and literally tearing them apart with bloody body parts flying in all directions.

I quickly change my focus from close-combat encounters, quickly switching to rifle, scoping, and taking out enemy snipers. Each enemy I kill with a counter replenishes a part of my armor and gradually builds up a rhythm of the combat encounter. There's almost a musicality to the sequence of parries, counter-attacks, and enemy defeats. There is a visceral cinemacity to all the chaos, with the camera changing focal lengths, highlighting

my combat tricks. I switch to a combat knife, bringing up the pause menu with a list of combos titled "right skull crusher" or "whirlwind slash".

The scanner indicates that a stronger enemy is ahead—a "tyranid warrior", an elite soldier, who needs several well-timed slashes to be vulnerable. I parry a few times, counter-attacking when possible, trying to initiate some combos; then, I dodge back, throw a grenade on a ground that explodes and my enemy is executable: I can press a special button, I for a few seconds lose the control of my character and an in-game animation plays. I watch as my space marine, painted in pink-black colors I picked in the armouring section of the game after talking with my "battle-brothers", stomps up to the tyranid warrior, tears off his limbs, strikes its insides with a knife, and throws the limp corpse away. As the camera returns to the usual over-the-shoulder position, my suit's armor replenishes. I press a communication button, and my guy shouts, "For the Emperor!"



Fig. 15: My space marine executes the tyranid foe.

The sheer brutality of *Space Marine 2* avatar play is not exceptional. Yet, this is a game from a franchise whose fans have been somewhat implicated in real-life far-right politics (Evans, 2022). This game has generated discussions about the political ramifications of its aesthetics and story (Evans-Thirlwell, 2024). To make sense of it, one needs more than just a theory of avatarhood. However, the space marine avatars in *Space Marine 2* and the kinesthetic, agential pleasures they induce cannot be

disregarded. In other words, if the grim far future where these genetically-altered supersoldiers wage the eternal war of the Imperium of Men was conceived as a satire (Evans, 2022), what role in misinterpreting said satire do games like *Space Marine 2* play via the hypermasculine embodiment they offer?

Avatar-as-interface works by abstracting the body and simulating it, making this vicarious embodiment central part of the intelligibility structure of the game—by unifying "perception and action, (...) [where] vicarious action follows from vicarious perception, and vice versa-" (Klevjer, 2022, p. 151) This happens through the technical structure, that offers seemingly neutral, logical and naturalized ways of inhabiting virtual worlds. Ways that are, in fact, highly ideological, tied to subject-positions that are affectively modulated, and where multiplicity of power relations coalesce. From the player-centric open world exploratory impulse, across the free-to-play affective economies tied with the avatar and the kinaesthetic pleasure of inhabiting it, to the broader cybernetic ideology of modulating our bodies through technical means.

In *Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine 2,* we are asked to incorporate a certain rhythm, with its attendant affective qualities, to play the game: to re-live the spectacular fun of dismembering enemy combatants with a subjectivity that is, by game rules and aesthetics, being affirmed as heroic. A pleasure of "piloting" a superhuman war "bio-machine" exerting domination, pure strength, and (narratively upheld) relentlessness in the face of a grave threat. It is a virtual body we are bound to affectively: through the in-game story, the game's rhythm, and synaesthetic pleasures, as well as unlockable customization options, allowing us to modify characters' armor, repaint it, and select from a multitude of weapons (hammers, swords, knives, guns, etc.).

Rune Klevjer (2022, p. 215) talks about avatars in terms of "concretisation" of the game's rules. Through the avatar's proxy skin, its virtual joints, gestures, and through the virtual "eyes" of the camera, we inhabit the world of simulation in a seemingly natural, transparent way. Wherever something feels natural, ideological critique needs to sound an alert: moreover, when this naturalisation of the avatar is a part of a long-running cybernetic logic of immediacy, transparency, and mastery that reifies arguably uneven relationship between us and our technical instruments.

Using the cases of *Genshin Impact* and *Armored Core,* I have attempted to demonstrate how the avatar, as a process, is implicated in broader ideological structures of contemporary society. In different ways, the proxies they offer us, these games center the avatar, habitually disciplining our body (incl. our cognition) to interpellate us in a concrete subject position towards their respective worlds. Yes, one is much more covert than the other: *Genshin Impact's* cute anime world finds its near aesthetic reversal in the configurable mechanical robots of *Armored Core*. Yet, the interactive structure of their respective models of embodiment is strangely similar.

This thesis aimed to bridge several strands of game scholarship, most notably work on avatarhood, gameworlds, and affect/phenomenology, with a critique of ideology. The resulting model of avatar-as-interface should complement existing insights into the structural workings of video games, with the hope that other projects utilizing other methodologies can use it as their starting point.

For one, the way we play an avatar-based game is informed by the discourse surrounding it (including paratexts), setting our expectations and frame of reference. Lastly, while I tried to at least sketch some pathways for delving deeper into specificities of these aesthetics (anime in the case of *Genshin Impact*, mecha in *Armored Core*), further studies could refine the understanding of the role aesthetics play in the avatar-as-interface.

Overall, the games in my analysis were chosen for their explanatory power—and while they represent some popular genres and forms of avatarhood, there are many different forms of 3D avatarhood that my thesis does not cover. For example, while the issue of erotics is only implicit in my analysis, looking closer at inhabiting overtly eroticised bodies within adult games could be especially interesting for insights into video game ideology, erotics (and attendant pleasures/affect), and gender expression. Additionally, one crucial aspect of avatarhood (and ideology) that is not addressed in this thesis is race. Nascent video game scholarship on the corporeal aspects of race (Patterson, 2022) demonstrates that this pathway is not only essential but also theoretically interesting. The same goes for queer embodiment.

Additional complementary reading could situate the issues of avatar and avatarhood within the contemporary discussions about body ableity. The avatar-as-interface and

bodily abstraction it affords necessarily includes a *model* of corporeality—one that more often than not contains presumptions about the simulated body's ability. Interesting avenues for reparative readings of games like *Baby Steps* could be undertaken, in a similar fashion to queer readings of 3D avatar games that represent non-normative corporeality (Ruberg, 2019, p. 84). At the same time, my analysis is necessarily informed by the capacities of my own body: by my *embodied literacy* as a long-time gaming enthusiast, as well as how my typically able body approaches game interfaces. Experiencing the avatar-as-interface with bodies that have chronic joint pain, limited limb movements, and so forth would presumably yield different perspectives and results.

My aim here was to offer a multi-faceted model that integrates several strands of video game scholarship. This means that I am not able to engage more thoroughly with various pathways and fields that late Marxist ideological critique can be extended into. I believe critique of ideology could be especially interesting to deepen further our understanding of video game agency (such as Bódi, 2002), a concept that I make use of, but due to the methodological constraints, never examine in big detail. Similarly, the pathways between game ideology and cybernetics are hinted at, but I think they also warrant their own in-depth examination.

Lastly, by using Althusser's theory of ideology, I find myself in a theoretically precarious position. On the one hand, as critiqued in-depth, for example, by Thompson (1978), Althusser's account of ideology leaves very little for individual agency of a subject/player. Since ideology is so pervasive, so imbricated even on the level of the formation of the subjectivity itself, it might look like an impenetrable totality. On the other hand, there's a discussion within Game Studies that complicates the account of video game ideology as being reducible to the textual analysis of a single artifact, such as *Genshin Impact*. Especially Apperley (2010, p. 8) argues, that "play is not a rupture, and digital games should not be understood as fantastic, virtual experiences but as embedded and situated in the material and mundane everyday," avoiding the pitfall of "conceptualizing them as closed systems: tidily discreet, virtual, hermeneutic objects." (Apperley, 2010, p. 13)

While Althusser's notion of ideology as necessarily embodied and inextricable from social rituals and institutions of the everyday seems to alleviate this danger, it still leaves curiously little for the individual subjective existence. On one hand, this is

understandable as Althusser wishes to describe a general theory of ideology that is transhistorical (Althusser, 2014, p. 262) and transindividual, on the other, one might ask, what then different "cultures of use" (Apperley, 2010, p. 18) conditioned by local material and social conditions have to do with singular instantiations of ideology in any given cultural artifact. In other words, what is lost in the ideological analysis of games like *Genshin Impact* if we don't account for the individual contexts of their gameplay?

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to satisfactorily answer this question: it would entail a very different theoretical approach, perhaps similar to the situated ethnography, "a vast dynamic repertoire of cultures, experiences, games, practices, relationships, and technologies" (Apperley, 2010, p. 9) that surrounds it.

Let's return, then, to *Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine 2.* By playing the game, we are interpellated by the affective, concretised systems underpinning the avatarial embodiment within the gameworld to alter our own bodies: by the aesthetic, emotional and procedural properties of the game we are made to act in a certain way, all the while being under the illusion that we are approaching the game as self-sufficient subjects exerting our capacity for entertainment. Yet, through the habitually incorporated avatar, the space marine supersoldier, we relive the pleasures that might as well be innocuous fun (the pleasurable feedback of the game), but also might be ones that can be channeled to some less-than-savory ends.

If this thesis prompts someone to stop by for a second, consider all the unsaid, unreflected, automatic, and seemingly neutral feelings that play a role ina game such as *Space Marine 2,* it has fulfilled its goal.

The ideology works through the virtual flesh just as it manifests in the physical one. Avatar-as-interface is a pathway that synaesthetically subjectivates us in virtual worlds. Through it, we might be recruited (in an Althusserian sense) as neoliberal subjects in front of whom a vast world that is ultimately, whose "array of possibilities obscures the underlying rigidity in the system" (Bailes, 2019, p. 9). We become enmeshed with machines, getting ready to adopt their rhythms and interfaces to maximise our effectiveness (perhaps, to rehearse for the future "potential labour" as per Kunzelman, 2022). We find our doubles that serve as allegories of bodies subjected to machines, cybernetic systems, and algorithmic feedback loops, offering

a possibility of reflection on how our bodies are disciplined by the myriad systems permeating our every (virtual) step. Aren't we, then, becoming a bit machinic in our everyday corporeal existence as well, one modulated by informational networks in the form of smart cities, augmented-reality games and apps, or gamified navigational systems?

Yet, the desires and pleasures can never be contained fully. Patterson (2020, p. 272) writes: "Games help realize this [broader pedagogical scene] scene by wedding the scientific with the aesthetic, the logical with the obscure, the procedural with the anarchic, the militaristic with the emotional." Video games are media of contradictions, as is the avatarial embodiment. At once disciplining and subversive, it points to the subjugating ideologies of society while providing a pleasurable escape. A spawning pool for fascism-adjacent power fantasies and hedonistic fun that demasks these power fantasies as silly (and fun) theatre. "There is no better example of the contradictory subject than the video game player," Patterson (2020, p. 272) concludes. A subject that invests in particular desires and lets itself be affected by the cybernetic systems that take on sinister forms outside the gaming sphere. Whether this defuses them or empowers them is up for debate.

Yet one thing is certain: avatars are here to stay. However disenchanting the contemporary society can be, these incarnations of our presence within virtual domains offer us a mirror, through which we can see the affective power of technologies molding our subjectivity. Better to be prepared. Now is the time of embodied monsters.

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