

Neoliberalism and the Corruption of Play in AAA Video Games

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate how neoliberal ideology corrupts play in AAA video games. The objectives are to demonstrate that neoliberal ideology corrupts play by creating conditions in which play becomes unbound from leisure, allowing play to be understood, undertaken, and assessed in economic terms. This fundamentally undermines play which should ideally be a free activity, separate from everyday life, uncertain in its outcome, and unproductive. Undermining play is significant as time spent playing should be a natural barrier to market and economic logics, but neoliberal structures remove this barrier.

AAA video games often offer expansive experiences to the millions who engage with the medium. Video games are systems of rules that ideally offer the player a meaningful experience through the play they enable. As theorized however, neoliberal structures can disrupt this. Neoliberalism is an ideological formation that organizes life according to market forces and offers a range of enjoyment in relation to this (Dean, 2008, p. 67). This enjoyment is related to a fostering of a neoliberal subjectivity in all areas of thought and action. The work of Fisher and Bauman is used to analyse neoliberalism in order to establish it as the dominant ideology of society and something which shapes the thoughts and actions within everyday life.

Analysis of AAA video games in this thesis uses cognitive mapping to make neoliberalism visible in the play-space. Cognitive mapping is a mental exercise that makes ideological structures, and relationships to those structures, visible. This cognitive mapping exercise is done by establishing a concept known as the entrepreneurial player (the form of subjectivity adopted in AAA video games that are embedded in neoliberal structures) and discerning general directives of play. How the player forms their sense of self in the video game, the level of agency the player has, and the way in which AAA video games are consumed will be subjects of analysis to reveal the extent of the "corruption of play". It will be revealed that play in AAA video games does not often occur under ideal conditions due to the influence of neoliberal ideology, instead serving to reproduce neoliberal ideology.

The significance of this work is that it exposes the broader corrupting influence of neoliberal ideology in multiple areas of life. Specifically, in relation to video games,

the identification of this process can allow for formulations of how the process of neoliberalisation can be resisted.

Introduction

Rationale of Study

As I was researching and writing this thesis, I regularly attended football matches at Goodison Park in order to watch Everton FC. I was always in the same seat so the same groups of people tended to be sat near me and I would overhear their conversations. Given the topic of this thesis (neoliberalism's impact upon play in video games) I realised that a group of teenagers on the row in front of me and two men sat behind me often spoke about the video games they played. Prior to the start of one match in 2017, the group of teenagers in front of me were discussing the weaknesses of the then Everton player Davy Klaassen. I realised they were talking about the digital representation of the footballer in the *FIFA 18* (2017) video game, specifically in the Ultimate Team mode.¹ The group were noting that he was not worth the investment of coins it would take to purchase Klaassen's card and that it was not useful to have him in the team, despite one of the individuals claiming that they liked the player. One of teenagers was also jokingly chastised by their companions for including a Liverpool footballer in their team, despite being an Evertonian. During football matches after this, the group would continue to talk about the Ultimate Team mode in *FIFA 18* as well as use the *FIFA 18* companion app on their phones, which allowed them to manage their team in Ultimate Team mode and trade player cards even when they were not sat at their consoles playing the video game.

At another match at Goodison Park in the same year, the two men sat behind me mentioned the "grind"² involved in qualifying for what is known as the Weekend League within the Ultimate Team mode in *FIFA 18*. In order to merely qualify for the Weekend League, a player of *FIFA 18* had to either win four consecutive games in a

¹ Ultimate Team mode is currently the most engaged with way of playing the FIFA video games. The mode requires the player to collect cards that represent different professional footballers that they then use to make teams. The player can then use these teams to play other players or against the AI on their console of choice. The player is rewarded with coins for playing or meeting objectives. These coins can then be spent on packs which contain random player cards or buy specific cards off a transfer market. The player can also use real money to purchase the packs containing players.

² A term used in gaming that infers doing repetitive (often unenjoyable) tasks in order to achieve something or reach a certain end.

daily knockout tournament, be ranked in division one,³ or have ranked in the gold rankings of the previous Weekend League. This reminded me of an article in Eurogamer⁴ commenting on the Weekend League, which suggested that qualifying for and playing in the Weekend League requires ‘punishing time commitment’ and is a highly ‘stressful’ game mode (Yin-Poole, 2017). It also seemed to confirm some of the key arguments of my PhD research, in that some video games can differ from conventional ideas that gaming is a way of leisurely spending time. Indeed, at a later football match, one of the men spoke about having played the Weekend League games and it being a taxing and time-consuming experience having taken up their whole Saturday. Despite the time commitment and draining nature of the play, the man pronounced he had achieved a “Gold 3” ranking, specifically stating “I am Gold 3!” to his friend. There was evident pride in attaining something from this competitive and taxing game mode. The friend was impressed both with the amount of effort and the competence this required to achieve.

Hearing people talk about video games was nothing especially new, but it was the language used in these discussions that struck me the most, specifically how each spoke about the play involved. The first group were averse to the prospect of including Davy Klaassen’s digital representation in their teams because it would limit their ability to perform well. One of the individuals commented that it is not “worth” including the player. Despite liking the player, they indicated they were prioritising something else over their own feelings towards who they would actually want in the team, including opting for a player from a rival team. The efficiency of the team seemed to be more crucial than their own feelings towards the cards used. Their use of the companion app indicated that the video game could be engaged with without necessarily “being played”, raising questions of where the game and the space outside it began and ended. Then the two men sat behind me used words and phrases like “grinding”, “tough work”, and “shattering” to describe the process of playing a

³ This would have to be done by winning multiple matches over a period of time and being promoted to division one out of a total of ten divisions. Each individual match is designated to last around 12 minutes but would normally take longer. For example, if the player were in division two they would need to acquire 18 points from a maximum of 10 matches with 3 points being awarded for a win, 1 point for a draw, and 0 points for a loss.

⁴ A reputable video game journalism website launched in 1999.

video game. At one point, one of the men stated that he “hated” *FIFA 18*, despite putting in many hours of play. The only time they seemed happy about the video game was when one could state “I am Gold 3”; the ability to declare that something can be gained from this arduous task seemed to be the entire point of the misery it induced. In both instances, it seemed that there were factors beyond enjoyment that were motivating the play of the video game.

Thinking more about how video games are discussed, I realised that my own friends that I spoke to about video games would be more likely to complain about the nature of what they had to do in video games than what they enjoyed. An example is a friend who spent hours collecting items in *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* (2015) in order to attain the achievements related to the items. They emphasised how boring it was but they felt compelled to do it to get the in-game boosts and achievement related to it. Motivating factors for the play of video games can be complex (as will be discussed in this thesis) but it appeared odd that hatred and a feeling of the task being laborious featured in what people said.

I reflected upon my own time playing video games from this, knowing that I tended to buy the *FIFA* video games every year as they were released. Thinking more consciously about my own motivations and emotions as I next played the game I felt similar emotions to the ones I overheard discussed at Goodison Park. I shared a triumphant social media post when I got an extremely valuable player card known as an “Icon” in a pack. The player depicted by the card was Roberto Carlos and I was incredibly excited about the value of this card both in terms of how much better it could make my team and the coins that could be made through its sale. I thought about how my team could then be more competitive and became confident about the fact I could aim to qualify for the Weekend League, and if I had managed this I would likely have shared this on social media too. I know I would have done this as in another video game, *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game* (2018), I reached what is known as Pro Rank⁵ and posted about this on social media. I made a specific note of this

⁵ Pro Rank in *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game* (2018) is the top ranking (of 25 ranks in total) in the video game. This rank is designated for the best players of the game to be able to play each other.

achievement highlighting the fact that I was a pro-ranked player, effectively declaring what it made me to anyone who would listen.

I had the *FIFA 18* companion app on my phone like the people at Goodison Park. I would use this outside of my time playing the video game to better prepare my team. I most often used this app whilst on my break at my place of work. I would engage with the video game outside of actually playing it because it would make my play more efficient. On the other hand, my smart phone also often alerts me of emails relating to my job as I play video games so it feels all the more apparent that the realms of labour and leisure are in a state of collapse. It is not just labour bleeding into leisure, it is leisure becoming more like labour and utilising the same technologies and networks. To be honest about my own feelings towards *FIFA 18*, I would say that I did not enjoy it and I fully understood the sentiment of the two men at Goodison Park that hated the video game. I kept playing this despite this hatred, though, as it offered me something, the ability to declare I was good at it. Similarly, with *Gwent: The Witcher Card Game*, I stopped playing regularly a month after I reached Pro Rank as I became stressed about maintaining my ranking and realised I was not enjoying the play of the video game. I tried to remember what moments of play I really enjoyed or gave me a meaningful experience since reaching the higher ranks and all I could think of were moments in which I had a status conferred on me by the game, attained an achievement, or done something which I could share on social media. Once I had reached Pro Rank I felt like the video game could offer me nothing else, as if it was an exchange I was partaking in for my own betterment.

I started the Introductory chapter to this thesis with these few anecdotes from my observation of other people talking about video games and from reflecting on my experience of playing because they highlight in no uncertain manner what I perceive to be a contradiction at the heart of video game playing, one that motivated me to undertake this PhD project. I thought video game play should be different from what my and other people's experiences are, especially in reference to play within a AAA video gaming context. Joy can still undoubtedly be found in AAA video games but the elements of playing that make it feel laborious are surely a cause for concern in a world in which work is becoming ubiquitous. "AAA" is understood to mean "A lot of

time, A lot of money, A lot of resources” (or something to that effect) and refers to a categorisation of big budget, grand scale video games. The term emerges from both the industry and the wider gaming community. It is highlighted in academic literature that AAA is not a ‘rigid’ definition when applied to video games and the AAA classification when applied infers different characteristics relating to numbers of developers, prestige of the studio and publisher, and budget (Matthew & Wearn, 2016, pp. 24-25).

How and why has time playing video games been increasingly bleeding into areas of everyday life that have nothing to do with playing and, conversely, how and why has time playing video games become so easily disrupted by areas of everyday life that have nothing to do with it? Why am I and people I know treating play as a form of exchange rather than an activity in and of itself? More specifically, why does play not feel like “play” at times? Why does play feel ‘corrupted’ by forces that do not (and should not) have nothing to do with it?. What should play be ideally? Does the dominant form of subjectivity affect how we play? How does it affect us at individuals? What sort of play can exist in this context? Play no longer feels bound to leisure and, it is argued in this thesis, this is because neoliberalism and its effects have corrupted play. This is especially in the context of AAA video games that represent the dominant form of games with which the majority of players have been engaging.

There is ample work that exists in the area of the complicating nature of video games and why and how they are played. For example, the notion of “playbour” has been introduced to highlight the blurred distinctions between work and play. Goggin, in particular, has argued that play and labour ‘to the extent that they were formerly thought to be stable, discrete categories have, in numerous contexts from office management to online game worlds, somehow changed places or come together to form striking hybrids’ (2011, p. 357). Sotamaa, on the other hand, identified how player agency was being changed even a decade ago by new possibilities presented by modern video game consoles, as players were able to become more than just a player of the video game and a producer of content in their own right (2010). These arguments on the changing nature of players’ relationship with play in video games is the sort of scholarship that this thesis seeks to build upon in order to demonstrate

how neoliberalism affects everyday life, especially as this work was not occupied directly with the effects of neoliberalism in gaming.

Furthermore, more recent work has been instrumental in identifying ways in which modern social and economic life (including neoliberalism) interact with the play of video games. Ruffino (2018) outlines the approach of creative games studies, an approach designed to question and problematise many of the assumed notions of what games are for and how games studies can be a valuable field of inquiry. This is an incredibly useful concept in relation to this thesis as it is the aim of this work to problematise the AAA video game medium itself and identify how neoliberal ideology is baked into the very digital architecture of the video game. More playful methods, such as Ruffino's creative games studies, are well equipped to carry this out as they allow for ample theorisation on the play within video games. Muriel and Crawford (2018) consider the importance of video games in relation to notions of identity and the centrality this has to modern notions of agency. Bailes (2018) studies how the antagonisms of modern social life within neoliberal structures also make themselves present in virtual video game environments. Woodcock (2019) offers a Marxist analysis of play and the games industry, studying the role of video games in the functioning of contemporary capitalism.

All this work has gone a long way to explore some of the ways in which game play operates within capitalist and more recently neoliberal structures. This thesis will add to this strand of research by examining in detail the ways in which neoliberalism corrupts play focussing primarily on the structures and consumption of the AAA video game medium. With the use of a cognitive mapping methodology to map the ideological terrain of the AAA video game it will be revealed that neoliberal ideology is present within the very structure of the video game. The "terrain" that will be mapped are features present within, such as the way information is presented, gameplay mechanics, or how elements of the video game are purchased. This is a novel method through which to approach the video game medium but using it can reveal how deeply embedded neoliberal ideology is within the AAA medium. It is my aim that the cognitive mapping method can build upon other contemporary research

and offer a way of studying video games that can reveal ideological significance within different elements of the medium.

Video Games and Neoliberalism

Video games and neoliberalism have in many ways developed alongside each other. Video games played on home consoles emerged in the 1970s with the *Magnavox Odyssey* and later the *Atari 2600*. The *Atari 2600* is especially important as it brought arcade classics like *Pong* (1977),⁶ *Space Invaders* (1978) and *Pac-Man* (1982) into the home. This console has been credited with having defined the way we play video games, ‘pulling kids from the arcade to the basement’ (Edgers, 2009). This was the beginning of a cultural shift, altering the leisure activities of millions for decades to come. Different manufacturers have produced and distributed different consoles over a long period of time now, the constant being people playing video games in their own home or private settings. At the time of writing, we are currently in the eighth generation⁷ of video game consoles that is dominated by the *PlayStation 4* and *Xbox One* released in 2013, and *Nintendo Switch* that was released in 2017.⁸ As stated, there is a long history of home video game consoles that dates to the 1970s but the work in this thesis will primarily be concerned with the AAA video games played on the seventh and eighth generation of video game consoles (the seventh generation included the *PlayStation 3*, *Xbox 360*, and *Nintendo Wii*). The reason for this focus is the networked nature of these consoles and their relevance to the current dominant form of subjectivity within neoliberalism. Whilst online play⁹ did exist prior to these consoles, the ubiquitous nature of downloadable content,¹⁰

⁶ *Pong* was contained in the video game *Video Olympics* (1977), a collection of video games that was released at the launch of the *Atari 2600*.

⁷ The history of video game consoles is usually referred to in the form of generations. A generation of consoles are the mass-market consoles released over a specific period of time. For example, consoles released between 1988 and 1990 would be the fourth generation.

⁸ The *Nintendo Switch* inclusion here is a nod to Nintendo’s importance to video game development as the *Nintendo Switch* is a home/portable hybrid console. This means it is different to the *PlayStation 4* and *Xbox One*. However, the *Nintendo Switch* is able to play some of the same video games as the *PlayStation 4* and *Xbox One* so I believe it merits inclusion.

⁹ A means of playing a video game that is either partially or primarily played via the internet or computer network.

¹⁰ Additional content for an already released video game that is often purchased by the player.

microtransactions,¹¹ and 'always online'¹² components in gaming has been particularly apparent during the life cycle of the seventh and eighth generation consoles. These components, as will be discussed throughout this thesis, anchor the AAA video game within wider ideological frameworks, altering what is present in the play-space.

As well as the development of personal video game consoles, it was during the 1970s that neoliberal hegemony began to take root in various places around the world. Harvey identifies neoliberalism as:

...a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (2005, p. 2).

Harvey states that from the 1970s there was a turn towards neoliberal political and economic policies ('deregulation, privatisation, and the withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision') which has seen neoliberalism become hegemonic and the 'common-sense' way in which we understand the world (2005, p. 3). More historical details of the development of neoliberalism will be discussed in Chapter 3: Neoliberalism and Play. Becoming common-sense is ultimately the goal of all ideologies that seek to appear as a natural order of things, as neoliberalism does. Neoliberalism as an ideology seeks to make economic understanding of thought and action the common-sense understanding of thought and action, regardless of it being an economic activity or not. For instance, writing about a similar effect in a very different context, Foucault noted how the mother-child relationship has been distilled into an investment of time that produces the output of human capital in the form of the child's eventual ability to produce value (2008, pp. 243-244).

¹¹ The purchasing of virtual goods in a gaming context. As with downloadable content, these purchases are made in a video game which is already owned by the player.

¹² The video game must always be connected to a server to be played even if the player is not playing against other human players of the video game through online play. An example would be the discussed Ultimate Team mode in the *FIFA* video games.

Harvey makes a significant observation in relation to the neoliberalisation of society, stating that neoliberalism's interest in information technologies has 'compressed the rising density of market transactions in both space and time. [These technologies] have produced a particularly intensive burst of what I have elsewhere called 'time-space compression'' (2005, p. 4). Time-space compression refers to a change in relationship between space and time. It is rooted in the idea of the annihilation of space and time that occurs due to various technological developments. For example, telecommunications in many regards eliminated barriers of time and distance with their development. Time-space compression is a facet of everyday life today. In relation to neoliberalism this amounts to the market forces becoming present in more elements of everyday life, institutions outside of the market becoming marketized and governed by market logics. The market brings everything towards it in terms of functioning and understanding. Harvey relates the consequences of this to the work done by Lyotard, in which Lyotard states that the fragmentation of social relations brought about by a market ethic governing relations results in consequences in 'emotional, sexual, cultural, family, and international domains, as well as in political affairs' (1984, p. 66). As with Lyotard, Harvey notes that the cultural consequences of the domination of a market ethic are multifarious and ubiquitous (2005, p. 4). The long process of neoliberalisation has made its presence felt across multiple areas of life and continues to do so. How leisure is understood and undertaken has not gone untouched by this process. We are in an era in which the market ethic feels more dominant than ever, especially with regards to the gig economy (Scholz, 2017), platform capitalism (Srniczek, 2017), and other manifestations of neoliberal ideology. More and more, people understand their lives, actions, and thoughts in economic terms. It is the argument of this thesis that the insidious influence of neoliberal ideology has corrupted play.

Greene and Joseph have been particularly attentive to questions of technologies of time-space compression and the extent to which they help 're-scale capital accumulation in conjunction with new political forms' (2015, p. 235). In relation to video games they observe how the digital space itself can become a 'land' in which companies (and sometimes other players) can demand rent from the player (Greene

& Joseph, 2015, p. 237), specifically noting the capturing of value of video game companies from networks of players (Greene & Joseph, 2015, p. 239). Although their observation is largely industry focussed, one can adapt it to examine question relating to play, especially ones relating to the re-scaling and re-purposing of digital space as enabled by contemporary modes of playing AAA games. Such an approach would enable critics to observe that the players themselves seek to capture similar value from digital spaces of play as companies do. The operation of time-space compression is one of the ways in which play can become corrupted, as the operation of the play-space as a space for play can be altered to serve different operations (e.g. accumulation of financial capital or a capital of the self).

Neoliberalism is itself a slippery concept and there exists multiple forms of neoliberalisms with Peck describing it as a 'rascal concept', inferring it has a difficult and elusive nature (2013, p. 133). For example, neoliberalism can look and operate different in separate geographical locations, especially if those locations are in the Global South and the West respectively. For instance, the neoliberal state that was formed in Chile during the 1970s was characterised by brutal state repression of leftist and social movements and a freeing of the labour market from regulatory restraints (Harvey, 2005, pp. 7-8). The neoliberalism of today in Western states, on the other hand, is more associated with the formations around phenomena like the gig economy and platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017) (Woodcock & Graham, 2020), after decades of fostering entrepreneurial subjectivities and downplaying the significance of state-provided services (Foucault & Senellart, 2008). The form of neoliberalism that is studied in relation to this thesis is one that operates as a hegemonic ideology that seeks to organise life around economic criteria, focusing primarily on how game play is deployed towards this end.

Hall highlights that neoliberalism is 'not a single system' and has many variants (2011, p. 708), despite this it is still '*politically* necessary' to identify neoliberalism in order to give content to the resistance of neoliberalism (2011, p. 706, emphasis added). This is also a point made by Bacevic who, in studying neoliberalism as an epistemic subject and object, states that 'knowledge of the negative effects of specific forms of behaviour is not sufficient to make them go away' and therefore it is important to

“know” neoliberalism in order to be able to fight it (2019, p. 389). In this respect, being able to identify neoliberalism’s role in altering play is part of a process of theorising how to counteract neoliberalism (which is something that can be developed in future work). Form still needs to be given to pervasive ideology if notions of resistance are to be developed.

Neoliberalism, as a hegemonic ideology, is obsessed with the institution and intensification of work. It is a struggle for play to be reconciled with the governing motives of neoliberal ideology because of this. Work and play are not discrete entities, despite their contrasting nature, and as a result it is possible for work to effectively co-opt play. Work on gamification (game-playing elements applied to other areas of activity), highlights the capitalist appropriation of play, noting that workplaces can collapse ‘domains of labour and leisure by combining the domains of play space and the real world’ (deWinter, et al., 2014, p. 111). This is only further intensified in the neoliberal context, as the workplace can be anywhere. Play in this society exists to be made useful in some way, and it will be argued that this contrasts with the supposed ideal conditions of play.

The theoretical understanding and approach to neoliberalism, and its relationship with play, will be developed by using concepts from the work of Fisher (2009) (2018), Bauman (2000) and Caillois (2001). These works have been specifically chosen because they encompass human behaviour and identity within a neoliberal society, as well as defining ideal conditions for play and the potential for them to be corrupted.

Fisher’s work provides an account of how ideology becomes all encompassing. Fisher describes his notion of ‘capitalist realism’ as ‘like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action’ (2009, p. 16). This is essentially how neoliberalism operates as an ideology; it must constrain thought and action in such a way that it is focussed on market logics and economic criteria. Alternatives do not seem possible in this environment, ways of thinking outside of market logics seem redundant and pointless. This produces what Fisher deems ‘reflexive impotence’; knowing that things are bad and believing there

is nothing that can be done about it (2009, p. 21). Bailes highlights this in relation to video games, stating that when this form of attitude takes hold 'all that remains is to mentally block out reality, with the most alluring option to seek refuge within the products of capitalist consumer entertainment' (2018, p. 52). There then arises a potential issue when the neoliberal reality does not stop at the border of the video game, and instead is present within the structures. What happens when play is not able to separate itself from the demands of a neoliberal reality? Play itself can become an act which reinforces the ideology.

Also, within Fisher's work is the idea that neoliberalism should be resisted, and this is something that it will be argued is necessary and can be enacted through play. Fisher states:

[Neoliberalism] remains tireless in its propagation of resentment against those few fugitives who can still escape the treadmill of debt and endless work... If there is to be any kind of future, it will depend on our winning back the uses of time that neoliberalism has sought to close off and make us forget (2018, p. 519).

Play has the potential to disrupt the propagation of the market ethic that is present in multiple areas of life. The reflexive impotence that Fisher observes in relation to the all-encompassing nature of a dominant ideology can be countered when a space is provided for a different sort of thought and action. Play can provide this space. The concept of this space, referred to throughout the thesis as the 'play-space', will be elaborated upon in the following chapters and refers to the conceptualisation of the space that the AAA video game provides for the player to play in.

Bauman's notion of 'liquidity' in relation to modern life is useful for theorising upon the relationship the individual has to neoliberal structures and consumption of video games as it encapsulates the uncertainty that plagues notions of identity in a neoliberal context, as well as highlighting the intensification of work and economic logics outside of spheres of labour. Liquidity in relation to identity refers to its shifting and unstable nature, as there is less about society that can make for a solid experience, for example geographical fixedness or professions are not as stable as

they were under Fordist economies (Bauman, 2000, pp. 58-59). Bauman's work highlights how individuals are tasked with defining themselves (2000, p. 31), and so the individual finds things to anchor their identity to. Bauman describes the process of neoliberalisation as such:

...economic order, once entrenched, will have colonized, re-educated and converted to its ways the rest of social life; that order came to dominate the totality of human life because whatever else might have happened in that life has been rendered irrelevant and ineffective as far as the relentless and continuous reproduction of that order was concerned (2000, p. 4).

The order referred to here is that of the structure of society and its drive towards the domination of rationality in the economic sense. This is reflected in a neoliberal context. Whilst Bauman is not explicitly referring to neoliberalism the observation applies, especially as it anticipates the work of Fisher in identifying the expansion and intensification of economic logics and practices in society. The individual experiences the process of subjectification within neoliberal structures and develops entrepreneurial tendencies. As Bauman states, the individual is tasked with defining themselves but access to all possible identities is not equal and the intensification of work serves to foster notions of an entrepreneurial self, with the individual understanding themselves as a form of capital and their actions as a way of improving that capital. To relate this to the work that will be done in this thesis, video games offer something to the player in terms of identity. The player can anchor themselves to an avatar or alleviate concern by separating themselves from everyday reality in the play-space. As will be detailed, the collapse of leisure and labour domains can make this difficult and as a result play increasingly becomes an activity for the betterment of the self as a form of human capital.

The play-space, as has been mentioned in this Introduction, is the mental and digital realm of play. Play should ideally be undertaken in a space that is designed and specified for play, and has been referred to in previous work as a 'magic circle' (Huizinga, 1949, pp. 10-11). This space needs to be separate from life outside of it as play needs to be governed by the rules of play, rather than any external factors. It is

also important to note that this separation does not infer that the play-space is an escape, in the way that the play of video games can be escapist. The player could still be thoroughly aware of their outside responsibilities, but their play should ideally be in the undisturbed, unbroken play-space. The play-space is a central concept to the thesis as it is this play-space that will be mapped when the cognitive mapping exercise is conducted throughout this work in order to reveal ideological significance in the play of AAA video games. This is a component of what separates this study from previous approaches to games, namely, the use of cognitive mapping is designed to reveal how neoliberal ideology is essentially woven into the play-space created by AAA video games, raising the issue of whether or not it is possible to truly *play* within neoliberal structures due to the corruption of play and the spaces provided for it. The cognitive mapping approach, via the works of Fisher, Bauman, and Caillois, uses critical theory to examine issues like this and theorise the modern AAA video game as a neoliberal object. The idea of something being a neoliberal object is that the very architecture and characteristics of it make it neoliberal in nature and function, serving to reproduce the dominant ideology. I use the phrase 'neoliberal object' to highlight the agency of the AAA video game.

It is argued in this thesis that there are ideal conditions of play and these are best outlined with a reading of Caillois' work (2001). The ideal conditions for play are met when its formal qualities, as outlined by Caillois (that play is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, regulative, and/or fictive (Caillois, 2001, p. 43)) are adhered to in how the play is structured and conducted. The corruption of play occurs when these formal qualities are compromised. The significance for the corruption of play is how the changed nature of play produces different consequences for the player. Caillois expresses similar concerns in a work that was originally published in the 1958. Considering how everyday life could corrupt play, he stated:

The rule of instinct again becoming absolute, the tendency to interfere with the isolated, sheltered, and neutralized kind of play spreads to daily life and tends to subordinate it to its own needs, as much as possible. What used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession. What was

an escape becomes an obligation, and what was a pastime is now a passion, compulsion, and source of anxiety (2001, p. 44).

These concerns become all the more pertinent with the nature of neoliberalism that was briefly discussed in this section. Neoliberal ideology makes its presence felt in multiple areas of life. There is an intensification of work, and it becomes harder to imagine other ways in which life can function due to how pervasive the ideology is. As neoliberal ideology and the market ethic it fosters come to dominate life, play is structured, understood, and performed in economic terms.

The Argument

I aim to provide insights into the influence of neoliberalism on play within AAA video games. Previous work in this area such as *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009) studied video games' relationship with global capital and examined the ways in which video games can be used to oppose global capital. This particular argument emerged from an observation that digital games offered the possibility to explore and imagine 'alternate worlds and social possibilities' (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009, p. xxxiv). This thesis, on the other hand, takes the approach that global capital, specifically the neoliberal ideology created and fostered by it, incorporates play into the reproduction of itself, therefore limiting potential resistance to it. Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter too highlight this limitation, noting that digital games are 'deeply embedded within global capital' meaning that any 'emancipatory of potential' of digital games must take this into account (2009, p. xxxiv). A key argument that the work in this thesis will emphasise is that neoliberal ideology effectively reformulates play so it reproduces neoliberal ideology. AAA video games themselves become organs of neoliberal ideology in the way that Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter observe how digital games are embedded in global capital.

Capitalist realism, liquid modernity, and Caillois' work on play together form the basis for the understanding of neoliberalism and the conditions it fosters within and outside of play. Specifically, this work is used to develop a concept that is central to this thesis: individual subjectivity within neoliberal structures fostering

entrepreneurial ways of being and how this form of subjectivity leads to a concept called 'the entrepreneurial player'. The dominant form of subjectivity can be understood through work on the entrepreneurial self. The notion of the entrepreneurial self is derived from the work of Foucault, who states that 'homo economicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself...being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings' (2008, p. 226). In essence, the entrepreneurial self is one that is concerned with maximising who and what they are according to economic criteria. Activity is assessed according to what amount of input could generate a desired output, testing whether an activity would be beneficial. Can they be more productive? Can they earn more? Can this be done more efficiently? Could they be doing something more productive or lucrative? These are the sort of guiding directives that would occur within this form of subjectivity. Vallas and Christin summarise this self as a 'form of subjectivity that aligns with market needs' and is fostered by neoliberal doctrines (2018, p. 5). The significance of this form of self in relation to play is that play, ideally, should be free, separate, uncertain, and unproductive, disrupting the motivation to align with market needs and assess thought and action according to economic criteria. This is disrupted however with the presence of neoliberal ideology in the play-space.

As has been touched upon in this Introduction, neoliberal ideology makes its presence felt in multiple areas of life. Its presence in play is achieved through the way in which individuals are encouraged to conduct themselves, leading to the formation of the entrepreneurial self in that area too. The work in this thesis theorises that the player is encouraged to adopt this form of subjectivity within their play too, becoming what is termed the 'entrepreneurial player'. As was stated in the previous paragraph, the entrepreneurial self would ask directives of themselves in order to be sure they are in keeping with neoliberal ways of assessing and conducting behaviour, which extends to play. The entrepreneurial player will also set themselves directives to best optimise their time playing. What these directives are can be discerned from how the player establishes their identity in the play-space, from what level of agency they have in the play-space, as well as from how the AAA video game, through the play it

enables, is consumed. Although these will be further detailed in Chapter 4: Methodology where I will also discuss how these directives are discerned through an understanding of how players engage with a AAA video game, in summary, the directives that an entrepreneurial player would ask of themselves at play are:

- “What can I do?”
- “How efficiently can I do it?”
- “Why am I doing this?”
- “What do I get out of this?”
- “How can I play more?”
- “How can I play better?”

Each of these directives relate to the different activities involved with playing and consuming AAA video games, the previously mentioned establishment of identity in the play-space, agency in the play-space, and methods of consumption of AAA video game. Answering these directives by studying different aspects of video games will reveal the extent of the “corruption of play”. “What can I do?” and “How efficiently can I do it?” relate to the formation of identity in the play-space and will be used to assess the corruption of play in Chapter 5: Identity. The video games selected for analysis are the maps in *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* (2014), *Middle-earth: Shadow of War* (2017), and *Far Cry 4* (2014) and the menus in *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* (2018) and *Fallout 4* (2015). “Why am I doing this?” and “What do I get out of this?” relate to what agency the player experiences in the play-space and will be used to assess the corruption of play in Chapter 6: Agency. The non-playable characters and level progression systems of *Fallout 4* (2015) and *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* (2018) will be the focus of analysis. “How can I play more?” and “How can I play better?” relate to the methods of consumption of AAA video games and the play they enable and will be used to assess the corruption of play in Chapter 7: Ideology. Downloadable content available for *Fallout 76* (2018), *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012) and microtransactions present in *FIFA 19* (2018), *Mortal Kombat X* (2015), and *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017) will be the focus of analysis.

A concept that will become prevalent in the analysis of AAA video games in this thesis is that of ‘endless play’. That the player is able to adopt the subjective position of the

entrepreneurial player is due to play becoming unbound from leisure, which allows play to function as both a form of leisure and of labour. As play is no longer purely leisure it is able to be viewed as a productive activity that can contribute something to the individual and as a result it need not end as an activity. Play is not thought of as a pointless waste of time in the neoliberal sense. Neoliberalism is not just something that colonises the game itself, but it changes the act and structure of play, enough for games to sprawl outside of the play-space. This is the way in which play becomes endless whilst arguably losing its potential to be an activity that can counter neoliberal ways of being. Ruffino studies the video game *AdVenture Capitalist* (2014), an app-based mobile video game that centres around wealth accumulation. From analysing the video game and discussion of it, Ruffino highlights that 'capitalism and its simulation are interpreted as necessary burdens, imposing laborious and repetitive tasks which one can never be "done" with. However, in these conditions, both play and labor are revealed in their absurdity' (2019, p. 17). This absurdity emerges due to the contradicting formulations of neoliberal subjectivities and ideal conditions of play. It is absurd to think that when given the opportunity to play we would simply repeat patterns of work and capital accumulation. The apparent boundless potentials of play are reduced to a mirror action of the world of work. This revelation of absurdity is indeed apparent in incremental mobile based games and I would argue that there is no reason why this cannot also become apparent through the play of highly rationalised, repetitive, and exploitive AAA video games. Endless play is not confined to incremental games but also appears in the expansive AAA titles that are analysed with this work. The concept of endless play will be developed in Chapter 5: Identity, Chapter 6: Agency, and Chapter 7: Ideology as the analysis reveals how play is corrupted in each instance.

There is always a need for this type of research in relation to video games as the medium shifts according to societal and technological change that continually occur. The use of critical theory and the approach to games studies means this thesis draws from the loosely defined field of "critical game studies" but also critical media studies more broadly. Whilst not a unified school, there is a noticeable trend within literature on video games that reflects critically on the role of video games in society (Barret,

2006) (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009) (Huntemann & Payne, 2010) (Goggin, 2011) (Shaw, 2014) (Muriel & Crawford, 2018) (Ruffino, 2018) (Woodcock, 2019), and with some work specifically referring to neoliberalism and/or the relationship video games have with work (Greene & Joseph, 2015) (Dooghan, 2016) (Brock, 2017) (Voorhees & Orlando, 2018) (Bailes, 2018) as mentioned earlier in this introductory chapter.

This research is positioned as a critical examination of neoliberalism and how it affects everyday life. The work within this thesis is theoretical in approach due to the ability to imagine and conceptualise how play is affected in relation to neoliberalism. Ethnographic approaches and series of interviews could also produce invaluable research in this area but these tend to point towards issues relating to game practice which is not the focus of this work. In the context of this work, a theoretical method is the preferred approach due to the ability to conceptualise theoretical approaches to the study of video games, namely the constructions of the entrepreneurial player and making corruption of play visible.

This thesis will inform future work on how to reject neoliberal forms of play and neoliberal ways of being more broadly. By developing the concepts of the entrepreneurial player and the corruption of play, video games will be used to demonstrate just how invasive neoliberal ideology is and why it is so essential that we have the tools to recognise it. By identifying where and how play is corrupted by neoliberal ideology, and the significance of it, we can begin to theorise how to, as was highlighted by Fisher (2018, p. 519), win back our time from neoliberal influence. Giddings, for example, theorises that:

...game economies might be understood as phantasmagorical in a more positive and generative sense—as liminoid, nonsensical, and strange, and hence as a seedbed for new formations and resources for behaving and imagining differently within and against the prevailing neoliberal cultural economy. (2018, p. 766)

Effectively what this means is that if games can develop different modes of exchange, value, and accumulation then neoliberal subjectivities could be resisted and

reimagined (2018, p. 780). A problem concerning this that I pose in this work is that neoliberalism is so woven into the architecture of AAA video games that this will be difficult to achieve. The corruption of play is particularly significant as play is the means through which imaginings of different ways of being and subjectivity can be established. A corruption of this process alters the extent to which possibilities for such imaginings can exist. AAA video games are a part of the structuring of the neoliberal real at this current moment in time. This is the culmination of much of the work I have engaged with so far. I argue in this thesis that AAA video games demonstrate that video game structures mostly mirror and further foster neoliberal subjectivities. Within the play of video games there is the potential to think outside of dominant ideological structures as ideal conditions of play can allow for such an opportunity. Yet, neoliberal influence is so pervasive that it alters the very conditions of play, going as far as placing imaginative bounds upon the digital mediums that enable play.

Video games, especially ones with the reach of AAA video games (for example, as of May 2019, *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) has sold 110 million copies and has generated over 6 billion US dollars in revenue (Kain, 2019)), have the opportunity to help huge numbers of people to reject neoliberal ways of being or at least temporarily alleviate the intensification of work that is fostered within neoliberal structures. It is essential to theorise and conceptualise ways in which play can be won back and maintained as free. It is not that play is inherently radical but that the opportunities for it to be radical (in the sense of opposing the dominant neoliberal ideology) are lessened due to its corruption by neoliberal ideology in the AAA video game format. It is correct to think that the play of video games *can* help us imagine new realities, but how possible is that when neoliberal ideology is an integral component of the play-space they enable?

Overview of Chapters

This theoretical understanding of neoliberalism and play in video games (as will be developed in Chapter 1: Conceptualising the Video Game, Chapter 2: Why Play AAA Video Games, and Chapter 3: Neoliberalism and Play) will be used in tandem with an analysis of AAA video games (that will be detailed in Chapter 4: Methodology and

conducted in Chapter 5: Identity, Chapter 6: Agency, and Chapter 7: Ideology) to demonstrate that play is corrupted due to the collapse of the leisure and labour domains and the intensification of work within neoliberal society. Chapter 4: Methodology will detail exactly how AAA video games will be analysed to determine the extent to which play is corrupted by neoliberal ideology. Chapter 5: Identity will be an analysis of how the player constructs their identity in the play-space through engagement with its maps and menus. Chapter 6: Agency will analyse how player agency is motivated and constrained within AAA video games by studying the role of non-playable characters¹³ and level progression systems. Chapter 7: Ideology will establish how the AAA video game becomes an organ of neoliberal ideology by analysing how downloadable content and microtransactions shape the way play is consumed and how further play is encouraged. It will ultimately be argued that neoliberal ideology corrupts play, fundamentally altering what play is and what can be found within it.

The purpose of Chapter 1: Conceptualising the Video Game is to analyse previous studies of video games and situate the work in this thesis in relation to them. This will be done with a review of a selective literature on the subject of video games in order to establish an understanding of what a video game fundamentally is. The chapter will begin by outlining why AAA video games are the specific focus of the work in this thesis. AAA video games have been selected as there is a business logic central to their production and consumption. Such a logic entails that there is a profit motive at the heart of the production of a commodity. This is not specific to video games but what makes it significant in this case is that the business logic becomes a totalising way of seeing all thought and action within neoliberalism and so seeps into play. It is not just a profit motive that is present in all forms of capitalism but also a way of understanding how everything should operate; it is far more totalising than just generating financial gain. Indeed, profit is also a part of the logic of consumption. The consumer within neoliberal structures consumes to better themselves, using their consumption to produce a profit of the self. This business logic fosters what Fisher deems a 'business ontology', stating that it becomes obvious that 'everything in

¹³ A character in a video game which is not controlled by the player.

society...should be run as a business' (2009, p. 17). Individual video games are logically understood as a business by developers and publishers but they are also understood as a business by players, in that they assess them and what play there is according to economic criteria. To appease entrepreneurial subjectivities, the video game needs to be able to provide something with the activity it enables. The player will need to rationalise the time they spend engaging with the video game in order to justify time playing. The influence of neoliberal ideology, coupled with the reasons why AAA video games are produced, encourage the player to think of their play in economic terms.

Chapter 1 will go on to study the formal aspects of video games and also situate them within their societal context. This will be done by first studying play and rules in the context of video games and then studying video games as a media form. Firstly, by studying existing literature on play and rules the chapter will establish that video games are fundamentally a system of rules that are designed to enable fluid forms of play. Rules are the fundamental building blocks of what make the game a game and can be engaged with in a fluid way, which means they do not have to be followed. Even if the player does not follow the design intentionality in terms of how the game *should* be played, they are still using the framework of the rules to facilitate their play. The video game enables, rather than governs play. Secondly, work relating to video games as a form of media will be assessed to provide a wider context to how video games function in society. This work will establish that video games are an inherently ideological medium. The video game's characteristics as a media product (like a film or TV show) are as essential in defining what it is. To divorce the video game of its social and cultural context. Video games can serve the function of bolstering and reproducing different ideologies within society and that is why it is essential to highlight their social and cultural context.

Chapter 1 will conclude with an overview of previous debates in games studies in order to state why these debates have been essential in informing the approach to video games in this thesis. This will be done by studying the ludology and narratology debate, the formative debate of the games studies discipline. This will allow for the highlighting of the essential components of studying video games, both in a ludic and

narratological sense, assessing the benefits and disadvantages of each approach. From here, it can be discussed how and why future approaches to video games can be developed. There is an importance to building upon the games studies that exist with new approaches to what is a shifting medium that can introduce new ways of playing, buying, and thinking about video games frequently.

The purpose of Chapter 2: Why Play AAA Video Games is to review selected literature on what motivates play in video games as well as establishing why video game play is desirable in a neoliberal context. The chapter will begin by outlining who the term 'player' refers to and who 'the player' is in the context of this thesis, before the concept of the entrepreneurial player is introduced and developed in Chapter 4: Methodology. Despite demographic biases that exist in the marketing and production of AAA video games, the player could be anyone of any background. Each individual within a neoliberal society is susceptible to the influence of neoliberal ideology regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on. Additionally, even if the individual is not employed, in the traditional sense of the term, they are still expected to work due to the nature of neoliberal society and exist within a domain of labour. Each person will experience neoliberalism differently according to their access to various materials and services, but technologies can often be purposed towards a certain end. In relation this, Beer's work on metrics demonstrates its intensifying role in shaping everyday life and is also connected to how neoliberalism operates (2016). In acknowledging the slippery nature of neoliberalism and the fact that there are many neoliberalisms (as also noted above), Beer identifies neoliberalism as 'a political economic context in order to highlight potential connections between the phenomena [he explores] and the broader power structures of which they are a part' (2016, p. 13). More specifically, he theorises that 'a neoliberal approach is likely to ramify the presence of networked technologies in practices and processes on an individual, organisation, and state level' and that '*systems of measurement and data extraction might be seen as the means of neoliberalisation*' (2016, p. 14, emphasis added). In the context of this work, I consider neoliberalism to be a socio-economic environment within which everyone is situated. Not just technologies, but everything

that is involved in the functioning of everyday life is organised around economic criteria, forming the branches of the wider neoliberal structures.

Chapter 2 will then outline a broad approach towards studying the motivations for playing a video game. The chapter will argue that by studying motivations relating to escapism, involvement, and identity formation a general motivation for the play of video games can be established. The three topics of escapism, involvement, and identity formation have been selected as they encompass a range of personal, cultural, and structural motivations for play. Within the analysis of each, common threads can be found that relate to how the player seeks meaningful experiences from the play of a video game.

Firstly, analysis of escapism as a motivation will reveal that social pressures produced by the intensification of work within neoliberal structures lead to a wish from the individual to seek temporal alleviation of conditions (such as stress caused by overwork or unstable social relations). The corruption of play is significant in relation to this as it can disrupt play's formal characteristic of being separate from everyday life, undermining escapist motivations. Secondly, the study of involvement as a motivation entails studying the actual act of play itself as a motivation. The command of a video game's controls, and the way elements of the video game's structures can prompt different responses and emotions can be a motivation for the player. However, the corruption of play can also disrupt this as neoliberal forms of subjectivity can restrict how the player will spend their time playing, potentially limiting experiences gained from playing a video game. Thirdly, identity formation is a motivation of individuals who wish to use the play in a video game to inform their sense of self. As has been noted, because notions of identity within neoliberalism have become increasingly shifting and unstable, video games offer an ability to anchor an unstable identity to something. Either through aligning with their avatar or simply becoming the player of a video game, the opportunity is there for the player to gain an experience that can become meaningful to them as it helps to form their identity. The corruption of play can potentially disrupt this motivation, if play's formal characteristics of being free, separate, uncertain, and unproductive are compromised, which will affect how the player is able to form their sense of identity

in the play-space. A common thread that emerges in the motivation to play video games is that players seek a meaningful experience, but the corruption of play by neoliberal ideology can disrupt or prevent these experiences.

The purpose of Chapter 3: Neoliberalism and Play is to historicise neoliberalism, explain its operation as an ideology and how a process of neoliberalisation occurred by providing an understanding of the link between neoliberalism and play. The chapter will establish that a cult of work forms within neoliberal structures that leads to a form of subjectivity known as the entrepreneurial self. The chapter will begin by detailing the development of neoliberalism as a school of thought and the set of practices that emerged from this. It will be observed that neoliberalism's theoretical development in the middle part of the 20th Century led to neoliberal policies being enacted globally across the 1970s and onwards whilst a broader neoliberal hegemony was established across multiple areas of life in the following decades, revealing the political, social, and cultural dominance of neoliberalism as an ideology. Due to this dominance a process of neoliberalisation occurred in multiple areas of life. Neoliberalisation entails the imaginaries and practices of neoliberal thought taking root within society, altering the ways in which thoughts and actions are understood and undertaken. The understanding of the process will be developed with a further detailing of the works of Fisher (2009) (2018) and Bauman (2000) touched upon in this introduction.

The chapter will demonstrate the way in which the development of neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology has resulted in the establishment of a cult of work. Neoliberal ideology fetishizes work and the performance of it. The cult of work amounts to the intensification of work in areas outside of labour domains. Working is in and of itself glorified and so its performance is lauded, especially when it is performed outside of more expected contexts. A resulting factor of this process that will be discussed is the collapse of the labour and leisure domains. It will be observed that the world of work and areas of leisure are not distinct within neoliberal structures. Labour practices spill into leisure and acts normally associated with leisure begin to resemble and are recognised in terms normally reserved for labour. Despite the flow of this collapse going in both directions, the work in this thesis is primarily concerned with the co-

option of leisure by labour, as work makes its presence felt in multiple areas of life. As a result of this and the process of neoliberalisation, a form of subjectivity known as the entrepreneurial self is formed. As will be demonstrated in Chapter 3, the entrepreneurial self is a form of subjectivity within neoliberal structures that is concerned with maximising who and what they are according to economic criteria. The gig economy will be used as an example of how this form of subjectivity is fostered within the cult of work and how individuals are encouraged to think and act.

The next section of the chapter will study how play itself is becoming neoliberalised and being affected by the cult of work and neoliberal subjectivities. Here the work of Caillois (2001), discussed briefly in this introduction, will be elaborated upon to demonstrate the process of the neoliberalisation of play as well as the consequences of it. A specific instance from an esports context discussed by Brock (2017) will be used to provide an example of neoliberalisation of play before the thesis establishes how the process of neoliberalisation of play functions in private as well as professionalised settings. The neoliberalisation of play is responsible for enabling the concept of endless play to emerge. Play becomes unbound from leisure within neoliberal contexts, and, as such, can be understood, carried out and assessed according to economic criteria. It is then possible that play becomes something useful in reproducing neoliberal ideology. On the surface, endless play can appear utopian in its imagining but play is only afforded the ability to be endless within neoliberalism as it can be deployed towards something and contribute to the reproduction of neoliberal ideology. Play becomes something that is in addition to the dominant ideological structure rather than an activity that is carried out separately from it. To relate this to video games, the video game still enables the play, but neoliberal ideology can begin to govern it.

Chapter 3 will conclude with a brief section on the importance of countering neoliberalism and neoliberal ways of being. The main focus of this thesis is the discussion of the corruption of play but it should be noted that neoliberalism is in itself corrupting, in that it alters other non-economic activity towards economic ends. Neoliberalism's reorganisation of life towards economic ends and around a market ethic is one that ultimately produces misery for many, and it is argued here that there

is a moral imperative to oppose this. Play could so easily be used to oppose neoliberalism as it can allow for a form of activity so outside of the neoliberal norm. Play can show that actions need not be productive to still be worthwhile, it does not need justification in what it can go on to do. It could be an action that requires no further justification other than it makes an individual happier. It would not matter, for example, that an individual may work better due to having played to be happy but the happiness is in itself enough of a reason. Play, in its ideal form, should be encouraged as within it is the possibility to reject neoliberal common-sense ways of thinking and acting, and the opportunity to embrace uncertainty and unproductiveness, reclaiming a use of time outside of the market ethic.

The purpose of Chapter 4: Methodology is to detail how the corruption of play will be revealed through analysis of AAA video games. The chapter will begin with a review of previous methodological approaches to the study of video games, highlighting studies that prioritise video game structure and other studies that are player-centric, outlining the general approach to video games. An understanding of these approaches will allow the work in this thesis to build upon them and establish the need for the development of a critical approach to AAA video games. The work in this thesis will develop a hybrid approach that incorporates both video game structure and player agency, an approach that will make use of the concept of cognitive mapping. An understanding of cognitive mapping will be developed from the work of Jameson (1984) and Toscano (2012) (Toscano & Kinkle, 2015). Cognitive mapping is the formation of a mental map of an occurrence of phenomena in everyday life, which is to allow for a mental image of an otherwise invisible phenomena. Toscano and Kinkle observe how cognitive mapping can 'enable individuals and collectives to render their place in a capitalist world-system intelligible' (2015, p. 7), effectively making ideological structures visible. This thesis aims to make neoliberal ideology in video games visible and cognitive mapping will be deployed towards this purpose. The work of Bordwell (1985) and Light (2018) will be used to justify a series of assumptions that will allow the cognitive mapping method to be used to reveal the ideological significance of play in AAA video games. The assumptions are that there is an expected way in which AAA video games will

unfold upon player engagement with them and that there will be a general pattern of play of AAA video games based on this expected unfolding.

The methodology used in this work will also establish the player of the AAA video game as the entrepreneurial player that sets themselves directives relating to their identity in the play-space, their agency within the play-space, and the structure of the AAA video game medium itself. The entrepreneurial player comes about from a wide process of subjectification that stems from the collapse of the leisure and labour domains. The lack of distinct areas of practice and the intensification of work means that the individual will more likely formulate their identity according to a market ethic and economic criteria. As noted, it is this that leads to the subjectivity of the entrepreneurial self, and this subjectivity also forms within play. The collapse of the leisure and labour domains affords the opportunity for the player to understand their time playing as a practice not thoroughly separated from the world outside of it, so the market ethic carries over into the play-space. This leads to a form of subjectivity that is described as the entrepreneurial player. This identification is necessary as the player of a video game should ideally be able to suspend their adherence to the rules that govern everyday reality and play as they wish, but the collapse of the leisure and labour domains prevent this. This form of subjectivity and the structure of AAA video games fosters the six directives already outlined above:

- “What can I do?”
- “How efficiently can I do it?”
- “Why am I doing this?”
- “What do I get out of this?”
- “How can I play more?”
- “How can I play better?”

These directives come about due to how the AAA video game is engaged with. Each one essentially denotes a step in how the AAA video game is played and consumed. No longer able to separate their time playing from the neoliberal ideology that dominates everyday life, play is primarily approached, understood, and carried out in terms of what it can do for the player and how it can be justified as a use of time.

The focus of the cognitive mapping exercise of the video game are the directives, they are what make the phenomena of neoliberalisation in the play-space visible as it would otherwise be invisible. Providing answers to the directives by studying how the player is introduced to the play-space, how the player can play and how the video game is consumed will make neoliberal ideology visible in the play-space. Using a selection of Caillois' formal qualities of play (2001, p. 43), specifically play needing to be free, separate, uncertain, and unproductive, the analysis can be used to assess the corruption of play. The answers provided to the directives will demonstrate whether their play is genuinely free, thoroughly separate from everyday reality, whether outcomes are uncertain, and if it is an unproductive activity.

Chapter 5: Identity is the first of three chapters of analysis of AAA video games that will reveal the corruption of play by neoliberal ideology. An understanding of identity is the basis for this analysis as how the player forms who they are and how they will operate in the play-space massively influences the sort of play they perform. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 will begin by studying theoretical work that relates to the selected topic of the chapter. The purpose of this is to provide a basis for the topic that the chapter is concerned with. The chapter will begin with an overview of relevant theoretical literature that develops an understanding of neoliberalism and identity. The purpose of this is to outline the approach to identity, highlighting how the player begins to form their identity in the play-space. Butler (2005), Foucault (1986), and Deleuze (1992) will be used to develop an understanding of how the self is formed and notions of it are constrained. Bauman's work (2000) will be used to incorporate the influence of neoliberalism on the formation of the self.

The analysis in Chapter 5 will be done by studying the maps and menus of selected AAA video games. The chapter will analyse the way in which maps of *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* (2014), *Middle-earth: Shadow of War* (2017), and *Far Cry 4* (2014) let the player know what they can do and motivate certain forms of play. The chapter will also analyse the inventory menus of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018) and *Fallout 4* (2015) as these components inform the player what they can do and how they can do it. The analysis will be done by answering the two directives relating to identity formation in the play-space, "what can I do?" and "how efficiently can I do it?". These

questions will be answered by reviewing what sort of content is within the maps and menus of the selected video games, focussing on what the player can do, what they are encouraged to do, and what sort of play is motivated and enabled by these structural elements of the video game.

Answers to these questions will be used to assess the corruption **of** play. As will be the case in Chapter 6: Agency and Chapter 7: Ideology, it will be possible to judge from the answers if the player is truly free to play how they wish, if the play is sufficiently separate from everyday reality, if outcomes of play are uncertain, and if time spent playing can be judged to have been unproductive. The analysis in Chapter 5 will recognise that play is corrupted in relation to recognising oneself in and engaging with the play-space. The player is not genuinely free to play as they wish, there is a lack of separation from everyday lived reality, uncertainty in play is discouraged, and play is directed towards productive ends.

As will also be the case for Chapters 6 and 7, the chapter will then consider ways in which corrupted play manifests in AAA video games to provide further analysis of the ideological significance of play. For Chapter 5, fast travel and the practice of speed-running video games¹⁴ will be used to demonstrate the way in which engagement with AAA video games in a way that eliminates uncertainty and motives play towards productive ends. The corruption of play here is also the beginning of the emergence of endless play offered by AAA video games. The video game structures make the player aware that there is always more to be played and other tasks to be completed. The corruption of play with regards to the player forming their identity in the play-space is significant as it serves to further entrench and reproduce neoliberal ways of being and subjectivities.

Chapter 6: Agency will analyse the degrees of player agency in AAA video games by studying the role of non-playable characters and level progression systems. Non-playable characters and the level progression systems of *Fallout 4* (2015) and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018) will be the objects of analysis. The chapter will begin

¹⁴ A speed-run is a playthrough of a video game which aims to complete the video game, or sections of it, in the fastest time possible.

with a review of relevant theoretical literature on an individual's agency within neoliberal structures and what sorts of agency the play-space can allow for. Hill's (2013) and Mukherjee's (2015) work on the avatar and a study of Richards' (2009) approach to the video game medium will be used to develop an understanding of the player's relationship with their digital manifestation. How neoliberal ideology can compromise and shape the player-avatar relationship will then be established by studying Althusser's work on ideological state apparatus (2014) and detailing how the video game interpellates the player as a subject of video game structures. The purpose of this is to establish an understanding of how neoliberalism effects behaviour in the play-space.

The analysis in Chapter 6 will be undertaken by studying non-playable characters and level progression systems. This will be achieved by providing answers to the directives of "why am I doing this" and "what do I get out of this?" with regards to how the player is motivated to behave and what incentives and goals are set to reward certain forms of play. An in-depth analysis of a non-playable character in *Fallout 4*, Preston Garvey, will be conducted to provide answers to the question "why am I doing this?". In the process, neoliberal imperatives in play will be made visible, as the player is motivated to prioritise structured forms of play. Analysis of level progression systems in AAA video games can provide answers to the directive of "what do I get out of this?". Specifically, perk systems in the selected video games will be studied to highlight how the player is motivated towards making their play productive. These answers will reveal how the player works towards visible ends and what can be seen as meaningful acts of play, rewarding them for following the design intentionality of the video game's structure.

Answers to these questions, as with Chapter 5, can be used to see if Caillois' formal qualities of play are still observed. The analysis drawn by answering the directives can reveal that players are not generally free to play as they wish; instead they are being motivated to follow the desired intentionality of the video game structure. Play is motivated towards being productive, with the player needing their play to result in an identifiable output that allows them to justify their time spent playing. This form

of corrupted play manifests in two forms of play known as grinding¹⁵ and farming¹⁶, which see the player completing tasks purely because they lead to an identifiable output rather than it being play that can offer a meaningful experience. As will be discussed, grinding and farming are evidence of a process of neoliberalisation of play in AAA video games. Endless play is manifested here also; the player of a video game is continually offered the opportunity to work towards something through their play regardless of them deriving enjoyment from it.

Chapter 7: Ideology will use analysis of downloadable content and microtransactions to establish that the AAA video game is an organ of neoliberal ideology. The chapter will begin with a review of relevant theoretical literature, again emphasising Althusser's work on ideological state apparatus (2014) and Srnicek's work on platform capitalism (2017) to build an understanding of the functioning of the AAA video game medium within neoliberalism. Additionally, the work of Virilio (1995) (2006) and Tomlinson (2007) will be used to emphasise the importance of speed in a neoliberal context. This is to highlight how neoliberal ideology values time, motivating the belief that the quicker things can be done the better. The wider purpose of this is to contextualise the AAA video game within neoliberal structures, revealing how the medium operates towards the reproduction of neoliberal ideology.

The analysis in Chapter 7 will be undertaken by providing answers to the directives "how can I play more?" and "how can I play better?". Answers to these questions will be provided by studying downloadable content and microtransactions within different AAA video games. The chapter will make use of case studies of downloadable content available for *Fallout 76* (2018), *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012) to answer the directive "how can I play more?". The answers will come from examining how this downloadable content is accessed and when it is released in relation to the base game.¹⁷ Historically, downloadable content suggests small additions to video games but in more recent years downloadable content has

¹⁵ This form of play was mentioned in relation to overhearing about people playing *FIFA 18* (2017). It entails doing repetitive, often unenjoyable, tasks in a video game towards a certain end.

¹⁶ Similar to grinding, farming is a tactic deployed by a player in which a section of a video game is continually exploited for gains with the video game, such as the accumulation of experience points or in-game currency.

¹⁷ The base game refers to the original standard release of the video game.

entailed expensive and expansive additions to already released video games. This exploits the entrepreneurial player's desire to maximise what they can do. There is not only the motivation of financial gain within this (although it may be for the developers and publishers) but also an ideological one that sees players feeling incomplete if they cannot play everything they possibly can. The presence of downloadable content can foster a need to consume more, entrenching neoliberal subjectivities. Microtransactions have become ubiquitous in AAA video games, and the chapter will look at specific microtransactions in *FIFA 19* (2018), *Mortal Kombat X* (2015), and *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017). This will provide answers to the directive "how can I play better?" by recognising what it is that microtransactions offer the player. The significance of many of these microtransactions is that the player is often motivated to spend money in order to save time. This carries several implications, a significant one being their time could be spent better or more efficiently than playing a video game. The player can effectively buy time, moving themselves closer to what they want from the video game quicker. As with downloadable content, the motivation for these microtransactions is not purely financial. There is an ideological imperative that suggests that the video game operates as an organ of neoliberal ideology. Players can use the AAA video game to feel more productive and to supplement their identities in a way that is compatible with neoliberal ends. And if they spend more money, they can arrive at their desired positions faster.

Answers to the directives will demonstrate that play in AAA video games is corrupted by neoliberal ideology, as the structure that enables the play serves to reproduce neoliberal ideology. The networked nature and the fostering of being able to satisfy the desire for instant gratification through the consumption of microtransactions will be discussed as manifestations of corrupted play. The nature of AAA video games grounds them within a neoliberal context meaning that the play-space it enables is also within this context; separating play from the reality outside of it becomes difficult. The ability of a player to play as they wish also becomes increasingly dependent upon socio-economic circumstance, not only with regards to the money required to purchase the video game and additional content, but how time rich they

are. Some players may have the ability to grind towards their goals if they have time, some may be able to purchase their way towards goals, and others will have their goals unfulfilled.

The Conclusion will surmise the argument of the work; that the ideal conditions of play are disrupted by neoliberal ideology. This results in the corruption of play which demonstrates the collapse of the labour and leisure domains and the intensification of work within all areas of activity in society. Players are rarely free to play as they wish, the play-space offered is not thoroughly separated from the neoliberal society outside of it, uncertainty of the outcome of play is discouraged, and play is made to be a productive activity for the player. The significance of this is that the play in AAA video games serves to reproduce neoliberal ideology when play should ideally be a barrier to work. The removal of another barrier to work from life further cements the neoliberal hegemony and produces further intensification of work and the misery that comes with it.

Limitations of the study will be noted. There are natural limitations to the theoretical nature of this thesis, it is not possible to account for the unique circumstances of all the individual players that use AAA video games to play. An ethnographic study could be used to address this limitation but it will be noted that the scope and resources available to this study were not available for an ethnographic study to be done alongside the theoretical aspects of the work. The Conclusion will also link the observations and findings of this work to current trends in the AAA video game industry and what the future of the medium could be. This will be undertaken by examining the emergence of streaming consoles.¹⁸ This will highlight a further potential limitation, the constantly adapting nature of the video game medium. What AAA video games look like now could be drastically different in a few years' time, as new consoles are released and different ways of playing becoming available.

¹⁸ A digital platform that streams video games via the internet rather than the player owning a digital or physical copy of a video game that they install on their own console. These consoles would theoretically work in a similar manner to popular streaming services like Netflix or Amazon Prime, with the player paying every month in order to have access to a library of video games.

Chapter 1: Conceptualising the Video Game

The purpose of this chapter is to conceptualise the video game in order to assess the video game's relationship to neoliberalism. AAA video games have been selected because of their cultural and social relevance and the purpose for which the player engages with the medium. The chapter begins by outlining these reasons, specifically noting that AAA video games have a business logic at their core which fosters a wider business ontology. This translates to individuals understanding activities, including their play, in economic terms regardless of the activity being within or outside of economic contexts. This business ontology and the individual understanding activity in economic terms is part of what reproduces neoliberal ideology within society.

To conceptualise the video game the chapter will study work relating to the formal characteristics of video games. Specifically, it will examine play and rules and the video game as a form of media. I will draw specifically on the work of Huizinga (1949) and Caillois (2001) to set out what the ideal conditions of play are. This work will then be developed by discussing the work of Sutton-Smith (2001) and Zimmerman (2004). The ideal conditions of play are met when the formal qualities of play, as outlined by Caillois (that play is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, regulative, and/or fictive (2001, p. 43)) are adhered to. Play is often enabled by rules that govern a game, so the rules and structures of video games are integral in what makes them what they are. The chapter will establish video games as a system of rules that enable play. Enable is deliberately used as the video game does not govern play, merely affords the player the opportunity to play. Following this, work relating to the video game as a media product will be used to establish video games in a broader cultural and social context. This will be done by studying video games in relation to other media products. Placing video games within this context reveals characteristics of the video game that are as integral as formal characteristics, like the rules that structure the game. From this it will be asserted that video games are inherently ideological. Pairing this observation with the previous section of play and rules establishes the video game as a system of rules that enable play and is inherently ideological, with the latter potentially limiting the video game's ability to provide ideal conditions for play.

This chapter will conclude with a review of the dominant ludology and narratology debate that has defined games studies. A review of this debate is essential as it has informed academic understandings of video games for years. This will allow for an assessment of the benefits and limitations of previous approaches, highlighting the need to continue to develop new and critical approaches to what is a constantly shifting medium. The supposed separation between ludic and narrative foci is often unnecessary, as the video game is informed by multiple circumstances inside and outside of the video game. In order to establish a comprehensive definition of the video game, the ludology and narratology debate should be considered and combined with the new contextual information and approach each new study brings with it.

Why AAA Video Games

This section of the chapter will establish and develop the reasoning for focussing on AAA video games within this thesis. Shaw highlights that 'there has already been a great deal of "cultural" work done around video games' with academics looking at video games in relation to multiple areas, including: thinking, learning, children, war, and many other topics (2010, p. 403). In reviewing video game research, Shaw calls for 'a critical cultural study of games, rather than a study of game culture as such' (2010, p. 404), a suggestion that signals a break with the so called 'ludic anxiety' (Anderson, 2013, pp. 291-292) in games studies and a move towards placing video games within ideological contexts (such as structures of racism or sexism) rather than studying them in isolation from wider cultural and social contexts. The work done in this study will contribute to a critical study of media within neoliberal structures, theorising how neoliberalism impacts the consumption of AAA video games. This contextualisation of video games within neoliberalism will also allow for further theorisations on how neoliberal ideology can be opposed.

Shaw's article on this subject was published in 2010 but there is still the need for further critical analysis, not because there is an absence of work on the subject but that there is still a need for theorising on a rapidly changing and significant part of culture. As well as the video game medium itself, the socio-economic circumstances

that inform their production and consumption will be changing too. For example, Egliston's work develops the concept of quantified play and self-tracking in video games (2019), locating video games within the larger context of the proliferation of self-tracking technologies that have been observed within neoliberal structures. Egliston's work gives direction to critical theorists and allows for the identification of the overlap of neoliberalism in multiple areas of life. Video games and the video game industry can be studied as a part of wider ideological structures as they play an increasingly prominent role within our current neoliberal society. Critical theory can be used to further elaborate upon this form of relationship between video game and ideological structures. For example, the intense rationalisation of the act of play signals the reformation of activity in order for it to comply with neoliberal ideology.

Given the diverse nature of the medium and the variety of types of video games that have been developed within it over the course of its history, it is beneficial to narrow the focus of study. As mentioned previously, AAA video games ('AAA' is understood to mean: 'A lot of time, A lot of resources, A lot of money') have been selected as the focus for the analysis in this study. They are the video game equivalent of blockbuster film in cinema, characterised by their big budgets and mass market appeal. The AAA video game market is part of a multi-billion-dollar game industry which, in 2018, hit \$137.9 billion in value with a base of 2.3 billion people playing video games (Sinclair, 2018). Value can often be a shifting signifier in what an industry is but that there is a base of 2.3 billion people (as of 2018) playing video games reflects the reach of the medium. AAA video games will not have generated all the value of the earlier figure, as massive online multiplayer and mobile gaming generated a sizeable portion (32% of people in the UK who play video games play mobile games (UKIE, 2020)) of it. However, the nature of the AAA format of the video game medium itself as being a potentially private part of leisure for the consumer separates it from multiplayer games on PC, console, and mobile. The player of the single player AAA video game is potentially seeking an experience which will be ideally separated from the reality outside the play-space. It is important to note that this notion of separation does not mean an escapist separation. The separation applies to being able to access a space

that is separated from their everyday reality, as the space is dedicated to a different set of governing rules.

Other categories of video games could also be utilised in similar studies. For instance, a study of massively multiplayer online games (MMOs)¹⁹ and neoliberal capitalism would no doubt also provide useful theoretical insight. MMOs can have huge player bases, generate large amounts of profit, and have their own surrounding communities and cultures. In this respect, studying the influence of neoliberalism upon these games would be incredibly useful in any effort to understand video game playing and its ideological imperatives. However, the nature of such a study would differ from the study of AAA games due to the inherently social nature of online play in MMOs.

I would argue that AAA video games with a single player component are differently impacted by neoliberalism given its effects upon a private space whereas MMOs have the inherent social component that, whilst still being affected by neoliberalism, would be affected in a different way. I will highlight however that this is a minor difference between the two video game formats but I believe the significance of the AAA being a private and personal experience is significant as the individual does not (theoretically) need to consider other humans as they conduct their play, whereas they would in an MMO. Both MMOs and AAAs will both be part of wider neoliberal structures and have the play within them impacted in similar ways. For instance, Silverman and Simon, in studying MMOs, identify that ‘the strongly seeded cultural values associated with play such as freedom, autonomy, and joy have now become values associated with “good” work’ (2009, p. 354). This entanglement of work and play will be discussed further in Chapter 3 by discussing the cult of work that emerges within neoliberal structures and the subsequent neoliberalisation of play. Sociality and community often found in MMOs and their players would also be adversely affected by the presence of neoliberal ideology organising this action around economic criteria. However, I would argue that the organisation of private leisure around economic criteria is a more pressing concern that can have severe

¹⁹ Video games played online between large numbers of players.

ramifications (this will be developed further in Chapter 3: Neoliberalism and Play). On the other hand, the inherently social component of MMOs is just as vital as the potentially private component of AAA video games in terms of how the ideal play for an individual can function. This significance is demonstrated by the rationalising influence of the architecture of AAA video games that will be discussed later in this chapter in the section on Play and Rules. Private spaces can be linked to networks so the player may use their play to demonstrate what they have gained from their play to a network of other players, introducing a competitive and social aspect to an otherwise private leisure activity.

Additionally, AAA video games have in recent years been undergoing quite substantial changes in how they are consumed. This shift in consumption is best captured in how downloadable content and microtransactions have become ubiquitous in AAA video games (these will be analysed in Chapter 7: Ideology). I believe these elements require analysis to reveal what ideological ramifications these methods of consumptions have for players of AAA video games.

AAA video games are also being studied rather than indie games²⁰ for reasons similar to not studying MMOs here. Indie games play would similarly be affected by neoliberal ideology but the nature of how these games are made means they could more easily be divorced from some wider ideological contexts. Indie games have no set definition, indeed their definition is a point of contention within gaming industry and community groups (Matthew & Wearn, 2016, p. 25). Similar to AAA however, indie games are often defined in relation to a set of characteristics. For instance, being independent of major developers and publishers is likely what lends the “indie” label to these games. I would argue that there are a general set of characteristics that encompass many indie games that tend to position them counter to AAA games. These include indie games having lower budgets, not be published by a prestigious company, and normally having small teams or a single individual work on them. Stern (an indie game developer), disagreeing with mainstream notions that indie games tend to be innovative and are made out of love, offers that indie games are defined

²⁰ Video games typically created by individuals or small development teams without the financial backing of a large publishing company.

by two characteristics: '(a) developed to completion without any publisher or licensor interference, and (b) created by a single developer or a small team' (Stern, 2012). Indie games can also provide several methodological challenges as the circumstances of each individual game and its development could be drastically different. Ultimately, what separates indie games from AAA video games is how and why the two are developed and published. This could relate to who is creating the game, why they are creating it, how it is being sold, and what sort of game it is. The listed variations for indie will not be as prominent in the AAA video game industry making theorisation and conceptualisation of the play of these games more accurate and grounded.

I would argue that AAA video games are equivalent to Hollywood blockbusters of the film industry, this similarity can be recognised in how a AAA video game and Hollywood blockbuster have an expected unfolding from the player and audience. This expectation of the way the media will unfold upon engagement with it, which will be discussed in Chapter 4 when the work of Bordwell is discussed (1985), infers there are preconceived notions of the media that is reinforced by its content. In this respect, the conditions of play can potentially differ drastically between AAA and indie games. AAA video games will likely unfold in relation to a conventional wisdom as they are often defined by tropes or commonalities (large open-world maps, fast travel mechanics, downloadable content, microtransactions, etc.) but the same cannot be said of indie games. Whilst I agree with Stern's point in the earlier paragraph that not all indie games will be innovative, they will not so easily cater to pre-existing ideological assumptions of how the video game will unfold in the way a player of AAA video game will think about the game. These pre-existing ideological notions are essential to the theoretical nature of this study and will be discussed in Chapter 4, so once again indie games pose a methodological challenge that I believe are best met with an extensive ethnographic study of indie games and players.

Additionally, the AAA video game industry can quite often encroach upon popular indie games, leading them to become AAA games. As an example, *Minecraft* (2011) began as an indie game (developed by Swedish company Mojang) before the developing company was purchased by Microsoft (manufacturers of the *Xbox*

consoles) in 2014 for \$2.5bn (Miller, 2014). Under Microsoft, *Minecraft* evolved into a huge transmedia franchise spawning entirely new versions of the game (*Minecraft: Story Mode* (2015) and *Minecraft: Dungeons* (2020)) to be sold alongside the original game. The immensely popular franchise also has a large amount of merchandise (clothing, annuals, toys, etc.) that have generated huge profits for the developer and all licensees also (Miller, 2014). The purchase of the *Minecraft* gaming universe by Microsoft reveals part of the logic behind large developers and publishing companies releasing games. As a video game industry analyst stated:

Not only is [*Minecraft*] profitable, but it continues to increase in profits years after its release, largely due to the passionate fan base that invests in building out their own *Minecraft* worlds. That helps explain why Microsoft would want *Minecraft* and would want to ensure it is always available on Microsoft's gaming platforms (quoted in Miller, 2014).

With profit being a motive in developing and releasing such games and using them to obtain as large a market-share as possible, major publishers and developers have a history of behaving the way Microsoft has with Mojang. For example, EA, another major developer and publisher of AAA games, has a reputation for purchasing smaller studios in large deals. Some of these studios are then shut down or used to produce successive franchise games (Schreier, 2015), losing entirely their identity as part of new corporate structures. In transitioning to a AAA video game from an indie game, *Minecraft* was fundamentally changed into a vehicle for the maximisation of profit across different media industries, rather than maintaining its focus as a sandbox world-building game. In becoming AAA then it more easily met pre-existing ideological notions of what a AAA video game is and what sort of content it would have. However, the profit motive will not be alien to indie developers and it is not just AAA video games that are interested in profit. The acquisition of these companies is indicative of bringing video games into wider neoliberal structures, one that AAA video games are an important part of (this will be developed further in Chapter 3: Neoliberalism and Play and Chapter 7: Ideology).

An additional reason for focussing on AAA video games can be found in Swalwell and Wilson's description of the marketing for Atari's game *Night Driver* (1976). The aspects of *Night Driver* that were foregrounded in the advertising were its 'technological innovation, player experience, and business logic' (2008, pp. 1-2). This was part of a flyer designed to sell the game to arcade owners and emphasised the game's "'profitability features,'" which were noted as including the realism and the experience the player can generate from this (Swalwell & Wilson, 2008, p. 1). The term 'business logic' did not carry this connotation in 1976 but looking back at it from today's perspective, this term is effectively shorthand for the profit motive that influences the production of different commodities, including video games. Developers and publishers are far more likely to develop and distribute a video game that will be sold at a profit. *Night Drive* was originally released in 1976 as an arcade game and later ported to home consoles in 1980 for the *Atari 2600* and is described as being 'visually superior' to its arcade version (McWherton, 2018). This makes the genealogy of the AAA video game very apparent; arcade games are very much their cultural predecessor. As was noted by Atari for their *Night Driver* game being offered to arcade owners, the video game was to be a 'profitable investment' (Swalwell & Wilson, 2008, p. 1). Within a capitalist society the 'profitable' part of this statement is unsurprising but the idea of play as an 'investment' has become prevalent in neoliberal understandings of play.

The influence of neoliberal ideology makes the business logic extend beyond the production of commodities and becomes a totalising attitude towards all thought and action. Fisher deems this extension of the business logic into everyday life as a 'business ontology', stating that it becomes obvious that 'everything in society...should be run as a business' to those operating within it (2009, p. 17). This ontological development has occurred with the emergence and establishment of a neoliberal hegemony within society.

This ontological development can be demonstrated by comparing the arcade video games of the 1970s and 1980s with AAA video games released in more recent years. Wolf notes 'video game purists' have argued that 'the playing of home computer

games constitutes a different experience' to that of the arcade despite the very similar technology in use (2001, p. 17). The similarities between the home console and the arcade game cannot be overlooked despite reservations about the experience of playing them. Kocurek highlights how 'coin-operated video gaming served as an introduction to the spending practices essential to the emergent consumer economy. The golden age of the arcade [mid-1970s to late-1980s] corresponded with a shift in consumer spending away from durable goods and toward novel entertainments' (Kocurek, 2012, p. 205). Players at arcades would effectively rent the game for a certain period or until they met conditions in the game that meant they had to stop playing. Players had to spend in order to keep playing the game. Kocurek also notes how people reacted to the constant spending on video games at the height of the arcade:

The discomfort with which many parents and moral guardians greeted the rise of the arcade stems not from knee-jerk terror of technology, but instead from deep anxieties about economic and cultural changes that have had profound and long-lasting effects not only on American youth, but on American culture as a whole (2012, p. 206).

I would argue that one of the effects this has had on global, not just American, culture is that play is understood in terms of economic exchange rather than play in and of itself. As was noted earlier, Silverman and Simon noted that play and notions of "good work" become indistinguishable (2009, p. 354), allowing a neoliberal ontology to be exercised in the undertaking of play. Baerg also identifies that the video game can be deployed as a technology that can 'reproduce procedural rhetorics linked to neoliberal political rationalities' (2009, p. 125). In relation to this it can be identified that within the development of video games, the adoption of the business ontology as a form of common-sense can be witnessed. I will demonstrate this observation in my analysis of the structures and consumption of AAA video games in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. What I argue is that these observations made by Silverman and Simon and Baerg relate to a wider reformation of play in AAA video games that is achieved by

altering the conditions of the play-space towards a business ontology rather than a space for playful pursuits.

Kocurek is correct in recognising the deeper anxiety of economic and cultural changes behind the pearl-clutching that often meets video games. The deeper anxiety, I argue, is the presence of the market ethic and economic logics in non-economic areas. In effect, it is an uneasiness of a neoliberal ontology existing within a space designated for play. Understanding non-economic activity through an economic lens produces a sense of unease. Young people playing video games in the arcade 'were being brought up as natives of the new economy' in a post-Fordist era (Kocurek, 2012, p. 207). These 'natives' not only began to understand the access of their play in whole new terms, but what that play actually was. Play could be thought of as input and output: "How much did my play cost?" "Did I get the most out of it that I could?" Play, both as consumption and the actual act of, became linked to economic criteria.

This has only intensified in recent years with the development of networked home video game consoles. Again, there is a knee-jerk reaction to new ways of playing a video game that conceal deeper concerns. There are similarities also with the long history of panic around violence in video games (Hsu, 2018), with the knee-jerk reactions to the visceral nature of video games like *Mortal Kombat* (1992) concealing a deeper anxiety about a violent culture. Networked home consoles like the *PlayStation 4* and *Xbox One* provide the player with constant means to purchase further content, normally through a method of consumption known as microtransaction. As with the arcade, microtransactions have been met with panics, being likened to problem gambling and drug use (Yin-Poole, 2017). Belgium, for example, have banned loot boxes²¹ in video games under their gambling laws and a US politician claimed developers deploying microtransactions were using 'predatory practices' (BBC News, 2018). The panic that met the proliferation of the arcade is again present with modern AAA video games, and again there is a deeper anxiety relating to long-lasting cultural changes. The way modern video games are discussed

²¹ A loot box is a digital item that contains a random item relevant to the video game in which it is being purchased. There is often an option to buy loot boxes with real money.

in the same breath as gambling and being predatory reveals a worry about a corrupting influence that the video games can have. Play appears to be understood more as an act of consumption rather than free human activity, and something that is potentially immoral with the likening to gambling, especially with regards to younger children.

I argue that neoliberal ideology is at the root of this corruption of play. As was mentioned in the introduction, the corruption of play occurs when the formal qualities of play (according to Caillois' definition) are compromised or altered. The microtransactions and loot box mechanics mentioned above are an especially visible manifestation of this corruption and I argue it has also occurred in less obvious ways, such as the way information within in-game maps and menus are organised. My theorisation that neoliberal ideology has caused corrupted play in AAA video games is based upon the way in which neoliberal subjectivities are reinforced and encouraged by video game structures. Fisher's notion of a business ontology forming within society, therefore, is helpful in identifying the way neoliberalism operates within the context of playing AAA video games. The business ontology informs not only how the video games are made but how they are understood and engaged with. Video games can potentially become something that do not enable play but productive forms of activity. An example of this includes the actions of a company called International Gaming Entertainment whose founder recognised 'the willingness of *World of Warcraft* [2004] players to pay real money for [in-game] items' and so employed poorly paid "gold farmers" who 'played in long, rotating shifts, repeating rote tasks in the game to gain gold and rarer items. These would be sold with a significant markup to Western gamers' (Swearingen, 2017). What this involved was paying people to 'play' (in the loosest sense of the word) in order to generate in-game currency, for example they could continually kill weak enemies by reloading an area of the game as there is no threat of failure and a guaranteed return. This practice also occurs with AAA video games. The Ultimate Team mode in the *FIFA* video games series that was discussed in the Introduction is linked to a player's specific account log in that they have to create in order to play the video game. These demonstrate that play can be used in exploitative and entrepreneurial ways, a clear

manifestation of the business ontology that is fostered by neoliberal ideology. Players can think how their play can be made useful, what returns they can get from it. Seeing this logic in the context of Huizinga's classic definition of play as 'an activity connected with no material interest, and that no profit can be gained from it' (1949, p. 13) it is easy to understand that such a definition is inaccurate both from the perspective of the player and those that make video games.

A further impact of neoliberalism on AAA video games can be glimpsed in a video from popular source for gaming news and reviews, Gameranx. Titled "5 Video Game Trends NOBODY ASKED FOR", the video details five trends in AAA video games (2018), four of which, I would argue, are the result of the influence of neoliberal ideology in video games. These four negatives about video games are described in the video as 'profit maximisation', 'loot boxes', the push to be 'always online' and the removal of single player campaigns in some games where they had previously existed. The video itself does not address neoliberalism, but it is arguably influencing what these features of AAA video games are. The issues around loot boxes (microtransactions) have been briefly discussed in this chapter but will be analysed in Chapter 7: Ideology, demonstrating the prioritisation of time and efficiency over play in AAA video games. The latter two points are also of interest to the idea of corrupted play in video games. Both the 'always online' nature and lack of single player in many AAA video games indicate the removal of private spaces in which the individual can play. To once again link to Kocurek's observation (2012, p. 206), there is a 'terror' in relation to the way video games work reflected in the annoyance portrayed by the narrator of the Gameranx video, there is also a deeper anxiety relating to the absence of a once private space.

The AAA video game is at a significant moment in its development, from the work discussed above: It is evidently stirring up deep anxieties about the nature of play and fears about how play operates. This demands study, as how play is understood and carried out has the potential to be significantly altered. If ideology is understood as being present 'not only in the ideas of a society, but also in the built environment and technologies that surround us' (Srnicek & Williams, 2015, p. 145), one can see

that neoliberalism constrains the possibilities of the technologies within which it is produced and that technologies are often 'reduced to a mere vehicle for generating profit and controlling workers' (Srnicek & Williams, 2015, p. 146). It is not unique to neoliberalism for commodities to be mere vehicles for profit, but this notion of control raised by Srnicek and Williams is related to the fostering of the business ontology and a neoliberal way of being. It is not so much a melding of play and work that signifies the corruption of play but the role of play within the understanding of thought and action. The discussion so far has looked at why AAA video games are being studied and I would argue that the corruption of play is most pertinent and recognisable in potentially, even ideally, private digital spaces. As analysis in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 will show, neoliberal ideology is effectively ingrained into the architecture of the AAA video game itself, altering what play can be carried out and what ontologies are fostered by play within these digital spaces. I identify this alteration of play as a corruption of it. The AAA video game is thought of as a business, not merely for its ability to generate profit, but what engagement with the medium can do to benefit the player.

Play and Rules

This section of the chapter will focus on how to define the video game so to understand what the general purpose of a video game is. Such a purpose might be approached from a large number of perspectives so a generalisation has to be made in order to find an inclusive definition. To find this generalisation the base aspects of any video game (the rules and the play) will be studied. In order to conceptualise the video game in general terms it suits to first approach as simple a video game as possible. Simplicity in this regard means a video game with basic features and a lack of complexity in relation to gameplay, genre, and methods of involvement. *Pong* (1977), the iconic black and white 2-D table tennis game, one of the first commercially successful video games, fits this description. As Wolf and Perron state, *Pong* is the most basic of video games, to an extent that 'it is hard to image a commercially feasible game that is simpler than *PONG*' (2003, p. 14). *Pong's* simplicity is evident, two blocks bat a ball between each other with the aim of knocking the ball past the

opposing block, scoring a point in doing so. Commencing from the video games 'basic features', Wolf and Perron state that the game is displayed on a monitor and then played according to a set of rules that determine an outcome (2003, p. 38). This can be taken as the narrow statement on what a video game is and seen to be true when applied to *Pong*. In this definition, the 'video' part is the easier to define as it relates to the display of the media and is not likely to need broadening unless we consider contexts of gaming and new technology that improve the quality of the display (e.g. arcade and home settings, virtual reality headsets, etc.). The 'game' part, however, is what complicates definitions of video games, especially given the vast array of types of video games today. The work in this section will attempt to elaborate upon the narrow definition (a game displayed on a monitor played according to a set of rules) by reviewing literature on play and rules.

To demonstrate how complex a definition of game can be, one can look at the example of the *Until Dawn* (2015). *Until Dawn* is an interactive survival-horror game that is narrative driven, with no clear conditions as to what constitutes winning and losing. In terms of what a video game offers, it is very far away from *Pong*. While it is clear that the aim in *Pong* is to outscore one's opponent, the aim of *Until Dawn* is to make choices as the narrative unfolds in relation to the player's choices. The plot involves eight characters who attend a party at a large cabin in a fictional snowy mountain setting in the aftermath of the disappearance of one of the group members' sister the previous year in the same mountain setting. The group at first believe themselves to be under threat from a murderer living in the mountains until the game takes a more supernatural turn towards monsters threatening the group. The player makes decisions and completes sequences in the game with the supposed aim of having the playable characters survive until sunrise. It is wrong, however, to suggest that survival is the aim, as if a character dies the player will not be confronted with a "game over" screen as they would in many games. The player is not asked to try the sequence of play again, rather the death of the character becomes part of the unfolding narrative. The player could even prompt a character's death in certain scenarios if that is what they choose to do. Even in the event of all playable characters dying the narrative completes and in the *PlayStation 4* edition of the game the player

is granted an achievement trophy²² entitled “This is THE end”. Having all the characters survive is not “winning” and having them all die is not “losing”. There is no winning or losing scenario in *Until Dawn*, there is no numerical score or ranking of player performance; only a narrative that the player interacts with. It is a game with an end but no winner or loser. It is clear that play in video games can look drastically different from game to game, which of course suggests that the definition provided with *Pong* in mind is rather inadequate in capturing the video game more broadly. To broaden the definition, conceptualising what it is that the player seeks when playing the video game can be considered.

There is a long history of academic work that discusses the concepts of games and play, with Huizinga (1949) and Caillois (2001) being prominent examples. However, this dissertation suggests that the video game ‘game’ resists definitions, especially when considering more complex, modern games with conceptualisations of winning and losing that are not as clear as the score in a game of *Pong* and the changing nature of socio-economic circumstances that surround the game discussed in the previous section of this chapter. Sutton-Smith highlights the ambiguous nature of play (that is present within the work of Caillois) and that play informs the formation of social life (2001). Sutton-Smith’s work focusses especially on children’s play, noting that the rules and norms of their play are informed by the morals, rules, and norms of the social world (2001, p. 36). This highlights an important component that play, whilst the activity itself requiring separation from non-play activity, informs understandings of social norms and activity. Additionally, Zimmerman offers a definition of play that encompasses its needs and complexity. Zimmerman states that ‘play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure. Play exists both because of and also despite the more rigid structures of a system’ (2004). This highlights how play can emerge from the navigation of and engagement with systems of rules, for example the rules of *Pong*. Both Sutton-Smith and Zimmerman’s work highlights a complexity and ambiguity in the defining play, showing the need for formalised identifications of its characteristics or traits if it is to be used in relation to analysis. It is for this reason

²² Trophies are digital rewards given for accomplishing certain tasks in video games on the *PlayStation 4*. The *Xbox One* has a similar feature often known as achievements.

that I find Caillois' identification of formal characteristics of play useful. That play is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, regulative, and/or fictive (Caillois, 2001, p. 43) provides characteristics for assessment when analysing what sort of play is occurring within the context of AAA video games.

Despite the disagreements amongst the theorists highlighted in the previous paragraph, there is the recurring notion that play forms and relates to the formation and understanding of social life. It is this characteristic that entails the corruption of play to be a significant event. The formal characteristics of play entail that it can be used to imagine ways of being outside of conventional neoliberal notions of conduct. The idea that actions can be uncertain and unproductive is counter to a socio-economic system that lionises entrepreneurial subjectivities and overwork. Play being corrupted by neoliberal ideology in a way that productivity and reduction of uncertainty become features of play has ramifications for how we can imagine ways of being. The corruption of play is the closing off an avenue of thought that can allow individuals to think and act outside of neoliberal subjectivities.

To refer again to the difference between *Pong* and *Until Dawn*, there is a complexity to *Until Dawn* that is not present in *Pong*. *Until Dawn* is like a horror movie in that it can be seen as anxiety inducing, characterised by a dark style, and serious in its orientation. So how is it still 'played' if it has these characteristics? The question of 'seriousness' in a game was at the core of one of the early definitions of play. As Huizinga states:

...summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner (1949, p. 13).

Further to this, Huizinga adds that the function of play takes two different forms: 'as a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something. These two functions can unite in such a way that the game "represents" a contest, or else becomes a contest for the best representation of something else' (1949, p. 13, emphasis added). Huizinga was not defining play with video games in mind but one can attempt to apply this notion of play to video games. Thinking about *Pong*, this definition of play seems to apply quite well. *Pong* is not really 'serious' in what it represents (a table tennis game), it is intended to absorb and hold the player's attention, and the game unfolds in a manner according to player actions and the rules that determine the score as the players compete to win. However, even a game of *Pong* could be played for material reasons, the player could bet on the outcome for example and so add a material interest to play. Indeed, not only can it be played for material reasons but the home console version of *Pong* came into creation due to the consistent financial success of the arcade version, in many ways ushering in the home console video game market and establishing Atari as the dominant player in the market (Parker & King, 2008). Due to being tied to wider capitalist structures, video games will always clash to a degree with Huizinga's formal characteristics of play.

To further develop the notion of 'seriousness' in more detail, modern AAA video game can be made for a multiplicity of reasons. As Rodriguez has pointed out 'the serious is not everywhere isolated from the playful,' especially as 'serious' games are often being used as 'teaching tools' while 'many manifestations of serious culture intrinsically possess playful aspects' (Rodriguez, 2006, p. xx). What is highlighted here is both how video games can be used in education to assist learning and how video games sold as recreational media (like *Until Dawn*) also allow for learning. Indeed, Gee has suggested that 'video games are potentially particularly good places where people can learn to situate meanings through embodied experiences' (2003, p. 26). This is because video games encourage players to think of play in a more complex way than simply being an experience separate from serious experiences that take place in everyday life. *Until Dawn* for example encourages the player to think about moral consequences of actions, that words and actions impact upon the feelings of

others and change the way people can act towards a person. In this sense the game can be viewed as a learning experience.

Studying a video game like those of the *Civilisation* series²³ it is possible to make the argument that it is a site of learning as it presents historical information for the player to engage with as a game. Learning takes place within play, whether it is an emotional process or the interpretation of information. As Rodriguez highlights, however, 'Huizinga himself understands that the concept of play cannot be circumscribed with precise conceptual boundaries' (2006, p. xx), making it clear that it is often difficult to separate the serious from the playful. Indeed, Huizinga notes that even 'fighting, as a cultural function, always presupposes limiting rules, and it requires, to a certain extent anyway, the recognition of its play quality' (1949, p. 89), and uses examples such as Medieval tournaments and even 'the rules of warfare' to demonstrate that they were built upon play-patterns (1949, p. 173). This encapsulates the fluctuating concept of play; especially in relation to video games, play can be several things, sometimes even contradictory: informative or nonsensical, innocent or sinister, life or death. Despite this, Huizinga's work still seeks a 'unitary conception of play' as a concept (Henricks, 2010, p. 167), which is difficult considering the complex nature of play.

Modern video games, on the other hand, can indeed be more serious (in terms of content) than *Pong*, often taking place in extremely well-designed universes and with objectives that can range from sci-fi, fantasy, action, horror, and multiple other generic themes. Much more than *Pong*, they are designed to absorb and hold the player's attention, often for exceedingly long amounts of time, while as the case of *Until Dawn* has demonstrated they might unfold in unpredictable ways without clear objectives or a sense of winning or losing. I would argue that this does not complicate play to any drastic degree, if anything the increasingly complex nature of game worlds offers more opportunity for different ways of playing, creating more possibilities for

²³ Turn-based strategy games in which players make moves during their turn in a similar fashion to a board game. In this series the player plays as a leader from history and leads their country, empire, city, or other such entity. For example, the player could play as Gandhi and hence control an Indian nation.

contests and representations of different things. The term “game world” (used in the earlier sentence) refers to the world created for the video game, meaning the setting in which the video game takes place. For example, part of the game world of *Until Dawn* is the described snowy mountain setting. I find it important to note here that this expression is different from “play-space” which refers to the supposedly separate space in which the player plays in the theoretical sense, not the visible environment sense that game world refers to. Game world is technical and visible, play-space is theoretical and mental.

Play and games do not necessarily require a winner and loser. It is rather the increased reach of capital into video games, and the neoliberal ideology fostered by it, that creates issues for play. From the discussed presence of microtransactions there is an evident intensification of monetisation of play in the video game medium, and it is not just the further monetisation but the ontological attitude (that everything should be treated as a business) that the monetisation fosters. As is highlighted by Roberts, what is especially significant to Huizinga’s notion of play is that it ‘lies outside of ordinary life and constitutes a free, voluntary activity’ (Roberts, 2018, p. 47). With the ubiquitous nature of neoliberal ideology and the commodification of play the boundary between what life is and is not, and what ‘ordinary’ is and not can become ill-defined. Understandings of leisure (gaming) and labour (working) become merged. Play here has the potential to become a contradictory notion.

Caillois builds upon Huizinga’s work stating that Huizinga’s definition of play is ‘at the same time too broad and too narrow’ (2001, p. 4). Caillois instead expands and produces definitions for different kinds of play: *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*. *Agon* is a competitive game such as football or chess; *alea* refers to games of chance like roulette; *mimicry* revolves around the idea of roleplaying (Caillois gives the examples of playing as a pirate in a game of make believe), and *ilinx* is the idea of play that ‘one produces in oneself...a state of dizziness and disorder’, which can be achieved, for example, by intoxication (2001, p. 12). Games can also combine elements of these classifications of play, the game of poker for example has characteristics of both *agon*

and alea (Caillois, 2001, p. 18). Within these different kinds of play, one can see once again clashing and contrasting components of play, relating to traits like competitiveness and seriousness. Caillois embraces this complication within play, with Henricks highlighting that Caillois' work is 'reconciled to play's many forms' (Henricks, 2010, p. 167). As Henricks also notes, Caillois writes that the agon, alea, mimicry, andilinx categorisations are not even an exhaustive list of the forms of play (2010, p. 167), with the motivation of Caillois' work being to highlight the 'ever-present tension in play between improvisation and rule observance, to explain different kinds of play forms, and to discuss the shift in play preferences throughout history' (Henricks, 2010, p. 178).

Play, in what it can be and how it can be carried out, is something hard to classify but there are ideal conditions in which this complex activity can be carried out. Caillois argues that there are formal qualities to play despite its tensions and altering forms and Brock summarises these qualities as play being free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, and regulated, and/or fictive (2017, p. 322). These are the ideal conditions of play. The player should be free to play as they wish, for their time playing to be separate from the reality outside the play-space, for the outcome of play to be uncertain, and for the play itself to be an unproductive activity. I would argue that Sicart makes similar observations about the nature of play, albeit being less concerned with formal characteristics. Sicart states that 'play is always dangerous, dabbling with risks, creating and destroying, and keeping a careful balance between both' (2014, p. 9). Sicart goes on to state that 'games are an example of carnivalesque behavior that leads to a festive liberation in search of freedom, expression, and truth' (2014, p. 11). I argue this reinforces Caillois' formal characteristics of play, the idea of play being dangerous and containing risk links to notions of freedom, uncertainty, and unproductiveness. Play is complex but at its core it is about the potential liberation that Sicart underscores and the separation that Caillois highlights. Play, to truly be play, should be outside the norm and unpredictable.

Brock highlights the complicated nature of play in social and cultural contexts (of which I have touched upon so far with the fostering of a business ontology within neoliberal structures) in his reading of Caillois:

Caillois argues that these “formal” qualities of play are brought into disrepute as the “sharp line dividing their ideal rules from the diffuse and insidious laws of daily life is blurred.” In other words, the social, political, and economic organization of modern life has a tendency to rationalize these formal qualities of play through the games that we interact with (2017, p. 322).

The business ontology to which I have referred in this work has rationalised play in the video game in the way Brock observed in his reading of Caillois. I take the notion of rationalisation in the Weberian sense, meaning the reorganisation of motivating factors towards economic means and outputs. For instance, there have been attempts to make video game play productive, with the brain-training genre²⁴ of games, such as *Dr Kawashima’s Brain Training: How Old Is Your Brain?* (2005). These games were designed with the aim of improving the mental capabilities of the player, which seems to contradict the idea of play as being unproductive. The underlying motivation for engaging with the brain training genre of video games is the notion of having to justify play as being something useful.

Another instance of the rationalisation of play can be seen in the development monitored play that produces a digital reward token for the player. On the *PlayStation 4* and *PlayStation 3* they are known as trophies, while on the *Xbox One* and *Xbox 360* they are referred to as achievements. On the *PlayStation 4*, trophies are divided into bronze (worth 15 points), silver (worth 30 points), and gold (worth 90 points) categories and earning all trophies in a game generates an additional platinum trophy (worth 180 points). The point score that players accumulate from

²⁴ A genre of video games that are centred on mental exercises that normally advertise themselves as being able to promote mental functions. For example, the game may include puzzles of increasing difficulty or spot the difference challenges.

the trophies earned in games gives them an overall trophy score which places them in a global ranking system (IGN, 2016).

This system of trophies or achievements can be seen as a product of a rationalisation of play in so far as they are designed to bestow a status on the player as being “accomplished”, acting as a sort of gaming capital. Indeed, the pursuit of trophies has turned into an obsession for a subculture of gamers because of the ‘elusive nature’ of the trophies and the demands they pose in terms of skill and time. This form of gameplay is often known as achievement hunting (Stallion83_, 2010). In one instance, a player stated that he plays games ‘70 to 120 hours a week’, even leaving games on as he sleeps, in pursuit of trophies (King, 2017). Here play becomes an obsession, focussed on targets, a sort of gaming iron cage. Iron cage is here borrowed from Weber, who describes the capitalist economic order as a ‘monstrous cosmos, into which the individual is born and which in practice is for him, at least as an individual, simply a given, an immutable shell...in which he is obliged to live’ (2002, p. 13). This obligation to always be working towards something is seen in how play can be engaged with in this regard. Trophy hunting play can also be seen as a form of conspicuous consumption, in that the consumption is used to signal to others about the consumers’ own identity (Veblen, 1912). The trophy hunting player then is not playing for the enjoyment or experience of the play itself but rather the ability to use the time playing to declare something about themselves and what they are. The consumption of the video game in this way infers a status upon them. The notions of rationalisation and status are not unique to neoliberalism but they do become intensified to a point of value obsessiveness within neoliberal structures. The output of symbolic reward is the driving motivator of play in this instance and entirely in line with neoliberal imperatives.

Given the complicated nature of play it is difficult to use the concept to help provide a narrow definition of what video games are. Whilst different games are still played, what that play is changes from game to game. Something that is common to most, if not all, games needs to be used for a useful narrow definition. Rules are something that are common to all games, even those without clearly defined objectives or

parameters that signify winning and losing. Whilst a video game could be experimental in terms of theme, design, or genre, it is still given a framework by rules, conditions that will be met to produce a certain consequence. The difference between *Pong* and *Until Dawn* is what Caldwell would refer to as 'representational strategies' (2004, p. 42). *Pong* and *Until Dawn* on the surface are completely different but they are both made up of rules, and input from the player changes what happens depending upon the structure of the game, whether that is the player's bat moving in *Pong* to hit the ball a certain way or the player choosing to sacrifice one character over another in *Until Dawn*.

Zimmerman highlighted that 'games are, in fact, essentially systemic. Every game has a mathematical substratum, a set of rules that lies under its surface' (2009, p. 26). Understood in narrow terms, video games are a system of rules that a player engages with. This definition is theoretically true of all video games and the divergence and difficulty of defining other video games stems from other areas such as genre, player interaction, design, the nature of play, external factors, and so on. The play in video games emerges from the system of rules that make up the game. The rules do not rigidly govern play in a very formal way however. A player can play against rules, with Myers highlighting how a player can play 'with – rather than according to – game rules', a form of play that also includes cheating in video games (2009, p. 54). Similarly, the player of both games could choose to play according to the intentionality of the game design or ignore the rules and play another way, in both instances the framework provided by the rules is what is enabling the play. For whatever reason, the player of *Pong* could want to play by moving their bat out the way of an incoming ball or the player of *Until Dawn* could run around in a circle with their avatar, paying no heed to the unfolding narrative, both are still playing. It is also a fair assumption to make that many players of a modern AAA video game would not be knowledgeable of every element of the rules of a video game prior to play. Myers highlights how game designers 'no longer, if they ever did, publish game manuals in anything close to complete form' as 'players eschew rule manuals in favour of an immediate experience' (2009, p. 59). With more video games purchased via a network and only existing in the digital sense this is even more likely today.

Rules of the game can also be broken and play is still possible. Video game rules can be twisted, distorted, broken (through not playing to set objectives or cheating) but they still serve the purpose of enabling play. They do not become redundant when they are broken or not engaged with. For example, the designer of a staircase would probably want people to walk up and down the stairs but it is possible for someone using the staircase to slide down or climb up the bannister; they are still using the staircase, just not as intended. To give the example of cheating in the *Grand Theft Auto* series, many games in the series have enabled the player to enter a code and have a tank appear for them to drive. This breaks the game rules but the player still uses this tank in the framework of the game, it is just a different sort of play to following the intentionality of the game designers.

Potentially, this form of cheating is allowed because of the ideally private nature of AAA video games and single player modes. Cheating would be harshly punished in a multiplayer environment, as it would impact upon other players. A single player's cheating, on the other hand, would only impact upon their game and so it is allowed. Cheating does not appear as prominent in contemporary AAA video games. In the early 2000s, for example, gaming magazines would often be sold with free additional books that contained cheat codes for games. This additional feature on gaming magazines does not exist anymore. I would argue this is due to the inherently networked nature of many AAA video games today (as noted earlier many video games have always online features). To demonstrate this, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018) contains a story creator mode in which players can create stories for other players to play in their single player (but networked) game. Some players were using this feature to create short 'quests' that could be completed quickly to gather experience points (XP)²⁵ that will level up their character in the game incredibly quickly (Boyle, 2019). This effectively allowed players to exploit this feature of the game in order to have their avatar become more powerful. The video game's publisher Ubisoft has stated that they will put a stop to this claiming it is due to

²⁵ Experience points (often referred to as XP) as points accumulated in certain video games for completing specific tasks. As these points build the player's level increases which means the player's avatar becomes more capable or stronger. This will be discussed in the analysis in Chapter 6: Agency.

'quality control' issues (Boyle, 2019), but it has been highlighted within the gaming community that they also sell microtransactions that grant XP rate boosts to the player, allowing them to level up quicker for a cost and that this is potentially the real reason they have put a stop to this cheating (or exploitation of a loophole) (Sterling, 2019). It is the intentionality of the player that leads play in the case of cheating and is an acceptable form of playing (as long as it does not interfere with other functions of the game such as monetisation).

The game is a space to play in, not a set of instructions that need to be followed. This space can be deemed the play-space and is the conceptual environment in which play takes place. The play-space is where the ideal conditions for play should be maintained to have the player carry out an uncorrupted form of play. The player of a video game can follow the intentionality of the game design, play counter to it, or even cheat within the play-space, this is not what corrupts play. Rather, play can potentially be corrupted due to external factors. Video games are a system of rules that exist to enable fluid forms of play, not govern forms of play.

Media Form

Video games are at times studied as unique due to elements that separate them from other forms of media. Unique elements in comparison to film and television (rules and play) have prompted a number of scholars, especially the ludic work that will be explored later in this chapter (Frasca, 1999) (Aarseth, 2001) (Juul, 2001) (Wesp, 2014), to adopt definitions of the video game without thoroughly contextualising them within a wider cultural and media context. Viewing the video game as a form of media characterised by similarities (rather than differences) to other media, I will further inform the definition of the video game beyond that of them being a system of rules that enables play.

Wolf and Perron highlight that there are elements that make video games 'unique', including 'an *algorithm, player activity, interface, and graphics*' (2003, p. 14, emphasis added). The algorithm and player activity refer to the interactivity of the media which does separate them from television and film, but the interface and

graphics elements are open to debate. Indeed, a different approach to studying the key characteristics of video games can be found in how Wolf highlights the history of video games in terms of the ways it can be periodised. As he suggests, such periodisation can take place:

- by arbitrary means (decades, eras, etc.)
- by technology (generations of home systems, arcade systems, or computer technology)
- by industry (companies, trends, crashes, etc.)
- by innovation (breakthroughs, firsts, influential games and game systems, etc.) (Wolf, 2012, p. 2)

This approach highlights the many characteristics to consider when thinking about video games, especially commercial video games, and provides a more thorough set of characteristics than looking at video games from a purely technological standpoint that will help to define what a video game is. It should also be noted that it is difficult to develop a standard set of characteristics that can be used to define a video game in perpetuity due to the rapidly evolving nature of video games and the video game industry. For example, the technology involved and the structure of the video game industry all lend to what a video game is, but technologies and industry structure can change year on year. In this respect, although video games can be seen as a system of rules that enable play, how these systems of rules are designed, why and under what historical circumstances are also key to defining what a video game is.

Looking at the similarities and differences between video games and other media can provide insight into what a video game is. Elkington notes how 'visual and interactive media show increasing aesthetic and procedural similarities' (2009, p. 213). Media convergence can see multiple media formats viewed through the same interface and using the same video game console. To take the *PlayStation 4* gaming console as an example, the player can use this device to play games but the console interface also allows access to applications like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Now TV where the player can watch films and television. Even the *PlayStation 1* (launched in 1994) could play audio CDs as well as video game CDs. This level of media convergence would

have been unimaginable on older generations of consoles like the *Nintendo 64* or *Atari 2600*, which were dedicated systems designed to play video games. Wolf speculated in 2001 that ‘the notion of a “dedicated system” may soon be a thing of the past’ (2001, p. 27) and this prediction has clearly come to pass. At the time of writing we are in the eighth generation of gaming consoles (*PlayStation 4*, *Xbox One*, *Nintendo Switch*) and all of these consoles are capable of displaying media other than video games; even the handheld systems (e.g. *Nintendo 3DS*, *PS Vita*) have applications like Netflix, YouTube, and messaging services.

Video games have too influenced other media forms. Films like *Doom* (2005), *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014), and *Hardcore Henry* (2015) are examples of the use of video game aesthetics in cinema, with this aesthetics taking the form of spectator perspective and game-like narrative structure. *Edge of Tomorrow* for example was described by one reviewer as maybe being ‘the best videogame movie not actually based on videogame’ and ‘the best videogame you can’t play’ (Watercutter, 2014). These observations are made in relation to this film because of the aesthetic qualities being similar to that of an action/shooter themed video game. The protagonist of the film continually dies in the same battle before coming back to life to fight the battle again, not unlike the avatar of a video game player dying within a level only to repeat the same level again in the hope of surviving this time. Correspondingly, *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake* (2004), *Heavy Rain* (2010), *The Last of Us* (2013), and *Until Dawn* (2015) are examples of video games employing cinematic narrative structure or aesthetics, centring an often-dramatic narrative or drawing influence from films. For example, the Cold War spy themed story of *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* clearly draws from the *James Bond* series in its narrative, even opening with a song reminiscent of songs attached to *James Bond* films. Many films have been adapted into video games (e.g. *The Lord of the Rings* series) and video games into films (e.g. *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) and *Doom* (2005)) demonstrating a broader media convergence in the culture industry. A recurring example of the convergence of not only media but consumer products generally is the production of *Lego* video games (and more recently *Lego* film) as part of the *Lego* universe, highlighting the importance of video games in transmedia culture (Thibault, 2015). Video games are an important part of the wider

media landscape, drawing influence from other sources and influencing other mediums in turn.

To further this, the *Mario* video game series shows how integral “non-game” qualities have been to the development of video games. The red hat wearing plumber character Mario is a cultural icon in his own right, appearing on a seemingly infinite variety of merchandise, like t-shirts, mugs, lunchboxes, etc. and having his own movie (*Super Mario Bros.* (1993)). This level of cultural impact from characters in video games is constant to this day, with a huge video game cosplaying²⁶ culture demonstrating the impact of video games further. When the Electronic Entertainment Expo (known as E3) was opened to the public in 2017 many of those who attended dressed as characters from video games (Haywald, 2017).

This importance to wider media and culture also reflects the video game mediums importance in wider ideological structures. To demonstrate this, it is necessary to establish how video games can be influential in an ideological sense. Bogost outlined the notion of persuasive games where he argues that video games employ ‘procedural rhetoric’, which is ‘the practice of using processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively’ (2007, p. 28). To demonstrate how procedural rhetoric functions Bogost examines *The McDonald’s Videogame* (2006). In this video game the player controls different areas of production for the McDonald’s fast food company and player actions often serve to highlight the corrupt and unethical practices of the company. Bogost highlights how the game ‘mounts a procedural rhetoric about the necessity of corruption in the global fast food business’ (2007, p. 31). The player makes decisions based on the rules of the game and the execution of these rules communicates a message. As it is clear, such messages are deeply ideological in nature, with Bogost noting that games present ‘some small subset of the natural world, in a necessarily biased manner’ (2006, p. 97), which suggests that ideology is encoded in the rules of the game and encourages players to make

²⁶ A portmanteau of ‘costume’ and ‘play’. People who cosplay dress and perform as a specific character.

decisions according to those rules. The video game functions then are inherently ideological.

Ferrara highlights that video games attempt to ‘persuade people to adopt a particular point of view or to take some action in the real world’ even if that viewpoint and action will only have bearing in the constructed world of the game (2013, p. 303). It should too be noted the ideological significance of video games extends beyond procedural rhetoric to include more traditional forms of persuasiveness that are present in other media, and procedural rhetoric could even be undermined by the way a game is played. For example, the earlier mentioned *The McDonald’s Videogame* could be played without the player taking note of the unethical implications of their decisions and instead just be proud of the amount of profit they generate within the video game. To further this observation, in a game such as *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (2014) there are clear examples of ideological significance in procedural rhetoric and narrative design that work in tandem to produce a desired message. For instance, in one section of this game the player is prompted to ‘hold X to pay respects,’²⁷ whilst standing over a soldier’s coffin in the emotive setting of a funeral. The game will not progress until you have pressed the correct button at the coffin. Read with purely the rules in mind, this is just an easy part of the game that requires the player to press one button to beat it. The mere presence of the “press X to pay respects” button prompt clearly infers that respecting the military, or at least fallen soldiers, is something that cannot be negotiated in the game universe and the respect of the player is demanded through video game mechanics. Like in *The McDonald’s Videogame* where the game creators use procedural rhetoric to highlight the corruption of the fast food industry, the game creators of *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* have mounted a procedural rhetoric and narrative to imply that soldiers in the military must be respected.

To further this idea that narrative and procedure are co-dependent, we can look at *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012). *Spec Ops: The Line* is a third-person shooter that sees the

²⁷ This button prompt will vary depending on the console that the video game is being played. In this instance, the X refers to the X button on an *Xbox One* controller.

player take control of Captain Martin Walker, who is sent into a post-catastrophe Dubai with two fellow soldiers on a reconnaissance mission. As the plot progresses, Walker's mental health deteriorates as he witnesses the horrors of war, especially during sequences in which the player has to make a choice on his behalf. The plot is heavily influenced by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (2007) and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). In one mission the player controls a remote camera that directs the fire of white phosphorous shells.²⁸ The gameplay here is presented through a black and white tactical camera so the enemies simply appear as indistinguishable white silhouettes. The player is encouraged to fire at all figures to clear a path so the narrative can progress. Once the player has cleared their opponents they walk through the devastation they have just caused and a cutscene begins.²⁹ This section reveals that the player has fired upon civilians and the player sees the charred remains of men, women, and children as his fellow soldiers scream that they have been turned into murderers and Captain Walker's mental state deteriorates further. There is a clear anti-war message within this narrative, the indiscriminate firing of weapons having led to civilian deaths. However, this message can be undermined by the game's rules and play. Once the player has finished the playable part of the mission they can skip the cinematic section that reveals there have been civilian casualties and continue on with the game. Without the cutscene, the aesthetics and mechanics of the mission are very similar to *Call of Duty* series style set piece missions that make use an AC-130 gunship, which do not take the consequences of the player's aerial bombardment into account in moral terms.

Game mechanics can also undermine the anti-war message, as objectives in the *Spec Ops: The Line* motivate the player to kill. For example, the player receives achievements and trophies for completing challenges like killing 3 enemies with a single grenade, killing 4 enemies with a shotgun in less than 10 seconds, killing 250 enemies with headshots, and killing 10 enemies with a melee attack. Without narrative context the anti-war *Spec Ops: The Line* ceases to be anti-war, the

²⁸ A form of explosive ammunition that burns at incredibly high temperatures, often producing horrific injuries for those it is fired at

²⁹ A cutscene is a cinematic section of a video game in which the player often does not direct what is taking place, instead following a set narrative path.

procedural rhetoric of the game does not emphasise the anti-war message in the way the narrative does. The first-person shooter *Battlefield 1* (2016) encounters a similar problem, with the short opening mission of the campaign mode entitled Storm of Steel seeing the player taking control of a soldier during a World War One battle. This title, 'Storm of Steel', is likely a homage to Ernst Jünger's memoir, a graphic account of trench warfare (2004). When the player's avatar is killed, rather than the conventional mission restart, the name of the character who has just died along with their date of birth and death appears on the screen, then the player controls another character and should this avatar die in combat their name and dates of birth and death will appear. This is the game making use of both procedure and narrative to make a persuasive point about the cost of war and emphasise the mortality of soldiers lost in combat. However, the campaign mode of *Battlefield 1* is short and lacks the content of the more developed part of the video game which is its online multiplayer mode. In this mode, the player has a nameless avatar and upon dying can continually respawn and re-join combat. The sub-set of games are also motivated by objectives and players are set targets to kill in certain ways to unlock new weapons and features. *Battlefield 1*, like *Spec Ops: The Line*, moves to motivated killing whilst simultaneously trying to carry an anti-war message as it struggles to reconcile competing rhetoric in procedure and narrative.

The McDonald's Videogame and *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* demonstrates the deliberate conveyance of an ideological message but video games can also do this in spite of design intention, as seen in the study of *Spec Ops: The Line* and *Battlefield 1*. This demonstrates that video games, as a media form, can carry competing and contrasting ideological messages and implications. It is in this way that video games have a relationship with neoliberal ideology. Dooghan argues that *Minecraft* (2011) 'affirms an apologetics of neoliberalism that trains players to be docile, fungible workers' and that the game positions the player in an 'idealised simulacrum' of neoliberalism (2016, p. 17). Dooghan here touches upon the Baudrillardian notion of simulacrum, conveying the idea that the operation of actions in the video game is actually based on the idea of how those actions should be performed rather than its actual performance. *Minecraft* does this by the very nature of the play in the video

game, in which the player is tasked with nothing beyond building a shelter in an attempt to survive hazards within the game world using materials they gather themselves from the environment. The 'idealised simulacrum' is in how the player's labour is essential to their survival and the more work they do the better chance of survival and flourishing from that survival they will have. I will go on to argue throughout this thesis (in Chapter 5: Identity, Chapter 6: Agency, and Chapter 7: Ideology) that this idealised simulacrum of neoliberalism is represented in AAA video games albeit not in such an obvious way. Rather the player begins to understand their play as another productive activity essential to formulating their sense of self as an entrepreneurial subject.

The media elements of the video game have to be considered along with the game elements when providing a definition, otherwise essential characteristics of the video game are overlooked. To summarise the narrow definition of video games developed from the previous section, video games are a system of rules that enable fluid forms of play. To add the work done in this section to this definition, it can be claimed that video games are also an inherently ideological media.

Ludology and Narratology

The supposed clash between technological and narratological elements of video games has dominated their theoretical conceptualisation by academia. This clash has been described as the ludology and narratology debate. Ludology is the 'focus on the medium and its peculiarities...For example, a study of a game's interactivity or its use of handheld controllers' (Anderson, 2013, p. 291). Whereas narratology can loosely be defined as an investigation of video games as text, for example 'a study of a game's characters or story is understood to be narratology' (Anderson, 2013, p. 291). As has already been argued in this chapter, AAA video games are as much their narrative and wider media contexts as they are their procedures and structures, which suggests that this distinction in approaches to video games has been unnecessary. Despite this consideration, the ludology and narratology debate has been prevalent in academic discourse around video games, and this section will continue by determining why this was the case, through studying the arguments of different rationales on how to

approach video games. Revisiting academic debates can allow for further theorisation on how to approach video games, as developments of wider society and culture can be incorporated or considered in relation to those approaches.

Bryce and Rutter highlight how it has been argued that video games present a 'departure from previous cultural and technological artefacts, and that in order to understand them we must develop a whole new research and practical approach' (2006, p. 7). Aarseth, when arguing for a new academic field devoted to the study of video games, claimed that 'computer games are perhaps the richest cultural genre we have yet seen, and this challenges our search for a suitable methodological approach' (2001). It is from such modes of thinking that the ludology approach was developed, which entails a focus on the video game medium itself when studying it. It appears that the ludological position is often rooted in a belief of video games as a unique medium and the study of them requires a high degree of medium specificity. This level of medium specificity often manifests in approaches that focus on technological elements of the video game medium, whilst disregarding other elements, especially narrative. Wesp highlights how 'the resistance to narrative in game studies has often been justified as a way to avoid the dire circumstance in which videogames are treated as if they were novels or films through the misapplication of principles taken from literary or film theory' (2014). Treating video games as other media, however, can be useful as it can highlight similarities and differences, leading to valuable insights. It is admirable to want to ensure that game studies is a clearly defined field. Aarseth has stated himself that 'game studies is a success. We did it', meaning that game studies have become a standardised academic field as 'conferences, teaching programs, even departments and institutes' relating to game studies are thriving (2015). However, a purely ludological approach to games is not needed to sustain this and other components of the video game as well as factors external to it need to be further explored as the medium continues to evolve.

Ludologists have suggested that simulation is an alternative to focussing on representation or narrative when looking at video games due to the medium's unique characteristics. Frasca, for example, states that 'traditional media is representational,

not simulational' (2003, p. 223) with the video game being simulational and that 'simulations can express messages in ways that narrative simply cannot' (Frasca, 2003, p. 225). The separation between narrative and simulation is justified in this way, due to the reactive nature of a simulation in terms of how it responds to input, in this case from the player of a video game, whilst narrative is a description of what occurs and is not reactive. For Simons, however, such an approach is an example of 'over-theorizing experiential aspects of gameplay' (2007). Simons objects to the characterisation of narrative as a 'description' and highlights how narratives 'provide excellent platforms for thought experiments and simulations of "models of behaviour"' (2007). In this respect, simulation does not exist separately to narrative, and therefore any conceptualisation of video games has to consider the role of narrative. The simulation is part of the narrative, and vice versa, to not consider the narrative is to not consider a part of the video game. *Until Dawn* is an example of how narrative in video games is reactive to input from play, as well as player choices altering narrative is an ever-increasing trend in video games when looking at game series like *Mass Effect*, *Fallout*, and *Elder Scrolls*. Furthermore, narrative elements in video games have often driven a game's success. The *Uncharted* series and *The Last of Us* are examples of narrative focussed games that have achieved massive popularity. Even sports themed video game series, like *NBA 2K18* (2017) and *FIFA 18* (2017) have shifted to include a narrative driven story mode to add an extra dimension to the games that are proving to be popular (Good, 2017).

It is evident that narrative and narrative elements (characters like Mario) are important to video games and explaining their popularity within culture, and as such they merit study. Frasca states 'the term narratology had to be invented to unify the works that scholars from different disciplines were doing about narrative' (1999). This in part explains why it was seen as an oppositional position to ludology, as ludologists wanted to define a new field and develop distinct approaches to video games. However, the ludology and narratology debate was more an attempt to force a distinction that is not rigorous, precise, or necessary. As Murray highlights:

Those interested in both games and stories see game elements in stories and story elements in games: interpenetrating sibling categories, neither of which completely subsumes the other. The ludology v narratology argument can never be resolved because one group of people is defining both sides of it. The “ludologists” are debating a phantom of their own creation (2013).

Murray is correct when stating that ludologists are debating a phantom of their own creation when it comes to narratology. Indeed, one would be pressed hard to find thinkers that would purely define themselves as narratologists. In the existing literature on the subject of the ludology and narratology debate, there are numerous theorists who are continually linked to the ludology side, (Aarseth, Juul, Eskelinen, Frasca, etc.) but there are many varied theorists who could fall under the umbrella of the narratology side but do not claim to be narratologists. This is because narratology is not seen as a useful categorisation for the study of video games, it does not really infer anything specific other than a supposed opposition to ludology. Attributing importance to narrative does nothing to reduce the importance of video game mechanics or technological attributes or dilute the significance of game studies itself as a distinct field of academic research. Procedural rhetoric and narrative design can work in tandem to make the video game persuasive, while technological aspects of the video game do not have a privileged position over the textual aspects, and vice versa.

The limits of the ludology vs. narratology debate have been highlighted as early as 2005. In a 2005 talk Murray stated that:

It is time to recognize the difference between the useful formalist methodology and the distractingly prescriptive ideology of game essentialism. No one group can define what is appropriate for the study of games. Game studies, like any organized pursuit of knowledge, is not a zero-sum team contest, but a multi-dimensional, open-ended puzzle that we all are engaged in cooperatively solving (2013).

Also, Kirkland argued 'video games constitute a genuinely fresh combination of audiovisuality and gaming, one necessitating a similar fusion of narratological and ludological perspectives if the medium is to be fully understood' (2005, p. 176). Both these arguments highlight the need for a broad perspective in analysing the significance of the video game medium and that a high degree of media specificity in the study of it can be maintained. Video games, as objects, are relatively unique but for a full understanding of their function they should be placed within wider contexts.

The ludological approach reifies gameness, attempting to define what games 'ought to be' and 'partly denies the connection between games and broader cultural histories and theoretical perspectives' (Swalwell & Wilson, 2008, pp. 3-4). It is not only cultural and theoretical histories but potential futures that can change what video games are. Anderson observes the fixation on the video game as a unique object to be a 'ludic anxiety' in games scholarship, because the ludic approach would 'frame games as so unique that they cannot be discussed without attempting to define their nature' but that this ludic anxiety towards studying video games is necessary (2013, pp. 291-292). Anderson explains that ludic scholarship has been essential to games studies as the observations made by ludologists have allowed the focus of game studies to move beyond the characteristics of video games in a technological sense, often referred to as 'transitional scholarship' (2013, p. 294). This scholarship 'move[s] beyond asking questions solely about the medium's differences and begin[s] to examine issues relevant to other media' (Anderson, 2013, p. 295). Examining relevance to not only other media but wider society is essential for defining a video game which is not a fixed medium.

I would argue that the ludic anxiety is no longer essential given that 'transitional scholarship' helped developed game studies, primarily by asking questions that frame video games in a social context. On the back of this progress, Anderson argues for the emergence of new approaches to the field, characterised by a 'communicative scholarship' which 'treats video games as if they were like other media' (2013, p. 297). Anderson gives the book *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* (Huntemann & Payne, 2010) as an example of communicative scholarship,

claiming that it 'offers a much wider variety of analysis than found in ludic or transitional scholarship' (Anderson, 2013, p. 297). *Joystick Soldiers* is a collection of different works that look at the relationship between militarism and video games. The work highlights how the development of video games has a history of the Pentagon cooperating with the commercial gaming sector and demonstrates the role of video games in the military-industrial complex (Huntemann & Payne, 2010, pp. 5-6). For example, one chapter in *Joystick Soldiers* looks at guns in video games, whilst also studying gun violence in different spaces and contexts like cinema (Lukas, 2010). The author concludes that video games are capable of reflecting 'disturbing truths' of society and that video games' 'discursive effects' can be used to engage people in more productive dialogue around issues of gun violence (Lukas, 2010, p. 89). These conclusions are drawn by situating video games within wider contexts and demonstrate the importance of not conceptualising video games within a vacuum given the social and cultural significance and potential they contain. In this instance, it was demonstrated that video games can reflect ideological structures but also have an influence on how they operate.

To take a more recent example of this broader form of scholarship, Woodcock's work studies the role of video games in contemporary capitalism (2019). Woodcock identifies video games as 'terrains of cultural struggle, shaped by work, capitalism, and ideas about society' (2019, p. 8) and uses Marxist analysis to highlight political struggles present in video games. For example, Woodcock uses Marxist theory to establish that it is important to understand the economy relations from which commodities are produced and to understand the commodity itself as a cultural artefact. From this position Woodcock argues that video games should be understood through 'worker's inquiry and class composition' (2019, p. 111). This approach places video games within wider media and ideological contexts whilst developing critical understandings of the features of a video game, notably by thoroughly studying the development of the video game and the industry (Woodcock, 2019, pp. 11-59). I would argue that video games cannot be understood fully outside of the wider media landscape, and as demonstrated by Woodcock, video games need to be understood in ideological contexts. It is true that they are a rich

cultural genre with unique traits compared to other mediums, but they cannot be fully understood within a vacuum.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have stressed the importance of understanding video games in wider media and ideological contexts. Firstly, it was outlined why AAA video games are the focus in this work. AAA video games best represent the fostering of a business ontology that emerges within neoliberal society. Individuals come to understand their play as a business, meaning they will rationalise and assess their time playing according to economic criteria. This is especially significant in relation to AAA video games as these video games often enable play in what should ideally be a private space, but AAA video games are becoming increasingly networked. Understanding play in this way and play being accessed in this sort of space can lead to a player becoming impacted by neoliberal ideology that is present within video game design and structures.

In the next section of the chapter work on rules and play in games was studied and it was found that video games are a system of rules. This is a narrow definition however, and to broaden it to better generalise the definition the complex nature of play needs to be further considered. The nature of play can be complicated in that it is carried out in varied ways and can provoke a multitude of different experiences for the player, especially in the context of the myriad of AAA video games that are available today, and this can complicate the definition of a video game. Through readings of literature on play and video games it was observed that forms of play in video games are fluid and that the video game is there to enable ways of playing rather than govern. Players can follow the intentionality of design when playing, play counter to the rules, and even cheat and still be playing as all of this play is relational to the system of rules that is the game. In this sense, video games are a system of rules that enable fluid forms of play. In addition to this work, ideal conditions for play were discerned from Caillois' work (2001, p. 43), these conditions being that the player should be free to play as they wish, the play should be carried out in a space separate

from the reality outside of it, the outcome of the play should be uncertain, and play should be an unproductive activity.

It was then established that video games are an inherently ideological form of media. By considering video games within a wider media context it can be observed that video games fit into wider ideological structures that influence thought and behaviour. The level of media convergence demonstrated by the AAA video game industry and the presence of procedural rhetoric in video games make it so that there will be an ideological component to the content of the format. Both game and non-game elements are responsible for ideological content within the AAA video game format.

The chapter concluded with an analysis of the ludology and narratology debate that has informed the development of games studies as an academic discipline. The purpose of this was to develop an understanding of how video games have been approached previously and what opportunities there are for the development of further critical approaches. It was found that video games should not be studied within a vacuum as a unique media. Whilst video games have traits unique to themselves, without considering non-play elements (such as wider narrative elements, how the video games are made, industry practice, and so on) there cannot be a full understanding of what the video game is. Video games, to be fully understood, should be placed within wider media and ideological contexts.

To summarise, in relation to this study, a video game is a system of rules that enable fluid forms of play and is inherently ideological. Understanding this, video games must play a role in the dominant ideological structure of our society, that being neoliberalism. The analysis carried out in this work will determine what that role is and how the video game reproduces neoliberal ideology.

Chapter 2: Why Play AAA Video Games

This chapter will examine selected literature on what possible motivations there can be for playing a video game in order to establish a general motivation for the play of a AAA video game. The chapter will begin by studying the notion of 'the player' in relation to this thesis to provide conceptual groundwork before the development of the 'entrepreneurial player' concept in Chapter 4: Methodology. As well as being semantically separate from the term 'gamer', the player of a AAA video game will be established as a subject within neoliberalism due to the way networked technologies are repurposed in neoliberal contexts.

The next section of this chapter will outline a broad approach to the study of motivations of a video game, and three categories that cover a range of motivations will be used to do this. It will be argued that by studying motivations relating to escapism, involvement, and identity formation a general motivation for the play of video games can be established. The three topics have been selected as they encompass a range of personal, cultural, and structural motivations for play. Within the analysis of each, common threads can be found that relate to how the player seeks meaningful experiences from the play of a video game.

An analysis of escapism as a motivation for playing a video game will be undertaken by studying relevant literature (Molesworth, 2009) (Molesworth & Watkins, 2014) (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2013) (Calleja, 2010). It will be observed that the player can seek to temporally alleviate conditions (such as stress relating to work) by playing. Many conditions that can prompt a desire to escape them through the use of media (especially work-related stress) are exacerbated within neoliberalism. It is the desire to escape that makes the potential corruption of play so significant to study as neoliberalism can, indeed motivate a desire to alleviate the conditions it fosters whilst also denying the ways in which they can be alleviated. Following this analysis, the focus will shift to the question of involvement (meaning the act of playing a video game itself) by studying involvement models as developed by Calleja (2011) and other work that notes the significance of involvement with the video game medium

(Brock, 2016) (Keogh, 2018). A command of a video games controls and what emotions sequences of a video game can prompt can be a motivation for the player to engage with a game. Neoliberal ideology can affect this as the subjectivities that are fostered within neoliberal structures can result in individuals re-evaluating what activities they carry out, especially if they do not produce productive outcomes. The final motivation analysed is that of identity formation. This refers to a player's motivation to use the video game in supplementing or forming their sense of self. The video game can provide this either through the act of play or by allowing the player to anchor their sense of self to their digital representation known as an avatar. Similar to the limitations relating to motivations concerning involvement, neoliberalism's impact within the play-space can influence how the player forms their sense of self upon entering the play-space let alone outside of it. The common thread that runs through each of these motivations is that the player of a video game is seeking a meaningful experience. However, this experience can be disrupted by the influence of neoliberal ideology.

The Player

The term player is used as it implies that the player is engaging with the video game attentively whilst hoping to play. Hanson describes the player as a 'direct participant in events, not simply an observer...directly engaged in the proceedings and outcome of the game' (2018, p. 29). The direct *physical* engagement is an important distinction to make, as someone who is giving the video game their full attention (as a spectator for example) is not necessarily playing. It is the player that physically influences the outcome of the game.

As was discussed in Chapter 1, the player of the game does not have to obey the rules of the video game to count as playing; they just have to engage with the rules in some way. Suits posits that 'games require obedience to rules which limit the permissible means to a sought end, and where such rules are obeyed just so that such activity can occur' (2005, p. 47). Suits goes on to summarise that 'players recognise both rules and goals' whereas a cheat for example would 'recognise goals but not rules' (2005, p. 60). This may not be fully the case with AAA video games. The player here is defined

according to their physical and mental engagement with the game rather than their following of the rules of the game, as play can be found within the video game regardless of rules being followed or broken. Therefore, even if the player cheats, they are still playing and hence are 'the player'.

'Gamer' as a cultural identity has not only traditionally linked to racism, sexism, and much else but also the identity of a gamer is one that has been seen as 'defined by consumption' (Shaw, 2013) and it is 'linked to certain types of consumption and knowledge... [And] a specific market segment, that of the white, heterosexual, male adolescent boy' (De Grove, et al., 2015, p. 347). As Shaw highlights, consumption 'has long been described as a way of displaying identity or group belonging' (2013), and as such the gamer identity often connotes certain beliefs and values. The demographic of video game players is more diverse than the cultural connotation that the term 'gamer' infers. For example, figures from 2016 demonstrated that 'women age eighteen or older represent a significantly larger proportion of the game-playing population (33 percent) than boys age eighteen or younger (15 percent)' (Craig & Wagner, 2016). Despite the diverse nature of actual players of video games, the 'gamer' label is linked to events like GamerGate that represent negative perceptions of video game playing. GamerGate was a hashtag campaign with the supposed aim of protesting perceived ethical failures in games journalism; it was in fact a coordinated hate campaign directed at women and progressive/left-leaning voices in the video game industry (Lees, 2016). As a result, the term gamer cannot easily be untangled from these connotations and wider cultural assumptions present within gaming discourses or industry relevant sectors.

The term player can refer to multiple individuals regardless of other categories of identity due to how neoliberalism ramifies the technology used to enable play. The primary formation of the player identity comes from their relation to the technology (video game) that enables it. This functions in a similar way to how modern shopping centres effectively designed to have everyone within them be a consumer first and foremost. As I already mentioned in the Introduction when I engaged with the work of Beer (2016) neoliberal ideology ramifies technology. With regards to this work, as

already stated, I agree that neoliberal ideology ramifies technology, in effect repurposing or altering it towards a process of reproducing neoliberal ideology. This is also the case with the AAA video game, the play enabled by this type of game can serve to reproduce neoliberal ideology. As such, 'the player', with regards to this thesis, is someone who engages with the AAA video game in this context.

To demonstrate this further, *Minecraft* (2011) and the *FIFA* video game series can be briefly studied in how the player is treated and structured according to the video game. As was discussed in Chapter 1, *Minecraft* is a game that operates as an 'idealised simulacrum' of neoliberalism and 'trains players to be docile, fungible workers' (Dooghan, 2016, p. 17). *Minecraft* achieves this through how the player has to think and act whilst playing the video game according to the intentionality of the design. As of 2017, *Minecraft* is the dominant digital game of the 3-12 age group (Mavoa, et al., 2018, p. 3283), which is the reason why I have chosen to highlight this example. The children playing *Minecraft* are not of working age but they are introduced to an idealised simulacrum of neoliberalism in the way a working adult would. The intensification of work will be offered to the player regardless of age as the technology itself works towards that end. As Hill notes our 'lives are valued in terms of their performative operation' (2015, p. 58). I argue that neoliberal ideology carries this into play, with play being just another activity that can be conducted and assessed according to what returns it gives. Play becomes such an activity, as it is assessed as to what can be gained from it rather than an activity as its own end.

A poll has shown that 18 to 24-year olds in the UK are more likely to engage with football through playing a video game (61%) than playing in a football team (37%) (BBC Sport, 2017). *FIFA* video games (since *FIFA 09* (2008)) have contained the Ultimate Team mode discussed in the Introduction. As was stated, players assemble teams by collecting digital cards that represent footballers. Within this is a mode called Squad Battles, a weekly competition in which players compete in football matches against an AI opponent to earn points. They achieve a ranking based on the points that entitles them to rewards when the competition ends. If the player plays every match available to them, they will play 45 matches over a week. The player, if

they wish to attain the best possible rewards, will have to plan their time playing and think about how to best utilise their time. For example, playing on a higher difficulty setting will award more points but make it more difficult to win with a loss meaning far fewer points. Players often carefully consider the play in this game mode. A video on EA Sports' (the publisher of the series) own website which explains the Squad Battles mode refers to certain ranking status as 'great uses of your time' (EA Sports, 2017). The player of *FIFA* here, regardless of who they are, is conditioned towards an understanding of play as something that should be understood in economic terms. This is an example of the process of neoliberalisation occurring.

The Ultimate Team mode in *FIFA* also contains microtransactions, in which the player spends real money for in-game items (this will be analysed in detail in Chapter 7: Ideology). In 2019 a case was highlighted in which children playing the game spent £550 in three weeks from their parent's bank account in the hope of attaining their favourite player in Ultimate Team and an adult player revealed they spent £8000 over two years playing *FIFA* video games (Klienman, 2019). It has also been claimed that these sort of mechanics in video games prime children to become gambling addicts once they reach adulthood (Williams, 2019). I would argue that there is a correct logic in this warning, and more research should certainly be carried out in this area specifically. From it can also be inferred that senses of alienation that can foster in adults from work can also occur in relation to children. As they could become primed for gambling, they could also become primed for overwork, and all the consequences that come along with that (such as alienation and stress). The operation of the AAA video game as a neoliberal technology is universal towards the player that gives their mental and physical attentions to the game.

'The player', when used in this work, refers to an individual within neoliberal structures engaging with a AAA video game. This section has expressed reasons why the term 'gamer' is not used, noting the cultural weight the term carries. 'Player' does not carry connotations the term 'gamer' does. Through relating the term 'player' to work on neoliberalism I have highlighted how players of AAA video games engage with a medium embedded within neoliberal structures that foster neoliberal

subjectivities. Prompted by the work of Beer (2016) and Hill (2015) I have sought to demonstrate that the “player” of a AAA video game is likely to be caught within a process of neoliberalisation. The player’s own pre-existing neoliberal subjectivities will be met by the structures of a AAA video game that have been ramified by the neoliberal society in which they are produced.

Why Escapism, Involvement, and Identification

Prior to studying different motivations of play, it is important to reiterate what ideal conditions for play are. As was discussed in Chapter 1, the play to be found within AAA video games is complex and resists simple definition but all play, if it is to be considered ideal play, will have identifiable formal qualities. It was established that ideal conditions for play are as follows: the player being able to play as they wish, the play being separate from the everyday reality outside of it, the outcome of the play to be uncertain, and for play to be an unproductive activity. These qualities could be compromised by the rationalising effect of modern life, especially the intensification of work within neoliberalism leading to the corruption of play. The significance of corruption is that play can potentially serve the purpose of reproducing neoliberal ideology rather than providing the player with an experience meaningful to them. Rather than being free, the player would rationalise their time and behaviour playing. Rather than being separate from everyday life, the play-space can be grounded in or disrupted by neoliberal structures. Rather than being uncertain, the player would seek guarantees of a return. Rather than being unproductive, the player would seek to have a productive output from their play.

The potential motivations for playing a video game are myriad and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to study and analyse all motivations. An attempt can be made however to study common motivations of play that are indicative of different reasons for playing. Crawford states that if we are going to ‘understand the social significance and pleasure obtained from gaming, it is essential that we seek to understand how these are located and incorporated into patterns of everyday life’ (2006, p. 510). Topics of escapism, involvement, and identity formation have been selected for study in relation to why someone would play a video game. There will be many other

potential reasons for playing the vastly different video games but these general themes allow for analysis relating to multiple factors that can be studied and observed within the AAA video game format, especially single player video games that will be focussed upon. For example, a sense of community and sociality could motivate the playing of video games, whether multiplayer or single player (having played a game in order to talk about it with others for example). Due to the focus of this study being primarily concerned with the effects of an individual's play in a private setting this motivation will not be analysed. As Crawford stated, understanding how video games fit into patterns for everyday life is a way in which motivations for playing them can be understood. As such, broad notions have been selected which cover various roles a video game could play in an individual's everyday life.

Escapism, involvement, and identity formation have been selected as they also relate to potential wants and needs of the individual within neoliberalism, as well as neoliberalism being able to disrupt each motivation. Escapism is a common way of understanding engagement with many media products. People may wish to separate themselves from their everyday reality, engagement with a video game may be an essential form of stress relief, through engagement with a video game. Involvement makes the player feel a sense of accomplishment or prompts certain emotions from the player in ways they cannot obtain in other areas of their life. Identity formation is an essential task for many as forming the notions of the self can be central to understanding themselves. The play to be found in the many different AAA video games can potentially help the player in this task, either through the play that is enabled or by allowing the player to anchor their sense of self to their avatar.

As mentioned in the opening of this chapter, there is existing work on escapism and video games (Molesworth, 2009) (Molesworth & Watkins, 2014) (Calleja, 2010) that can be used for the purpose of this chapter. The nature of work and social life within neoliberal structures can produce feelings of alienation. Feelings of alienation are not unique to neoliberalism but become especially prevalent within neoliberal structures due to the intensification of work and liquid nature of social life. Hill, referring to

Berardi (2009, p. 58), notes how the 'intensification of labour' can produce misery and unhappiness (Hill, 2015, p. 36) and Srnicek and Williams summarise the alienation experienced due to the structuring of society by stating that 'we feel adrift in a world we do not understand' (2015, p. 14). Both of these observations, that misery and misunderstanding are consequences of the current organisation of life can potentially be combated by attempting to avoid the intensification of labour and making sense of the world. The AAA video game offers play via a system of rules and a whole a play-space that the player can in effect use (in theory) to escape intensified labour practices and unstable conditions characterised by flexible employment or precarity in other aspects of life (lack of affordable housing, long-term debt, fewer opportunities for social mobility, etc.). The player can only consume what they are offered. If the play of AAA video games is corrupted by neoliberal ideology then escape from neoliberal conditions of intensified work can become difficult.

Involvement is an umbrella term for player engagement with the video game, covering motivations concerning responses that result from direct engagement with a video game. Calleja describes involvement as 'a prerequisite to the experience of higher-order cognitive processes such as presence or immersion' (2011, p. 35). In essence, it is the literal act of playing and what comes from that. The section will draw on Calleja's dimensions of player involvement (2011, pp. 43-44) to study motivations of play in relation to player involvement in video games. Involvement can be related to the influence of neoliberal ideology. Jones highlights how for many people (especially those who work in the service sector) feel a 'deep-seated alienation...the sheer tedium and boredom that often accompanies routine, repetitive work' (2016, pp. 262-263). This intensification of work is an observation on the nature of work within neoliberalism. The alienation and intensification of work can motivate the player to seek experiences outside of the domain of labour. This is similar to what motivates escapist reasoning for playing a video game, the player can seek a sense of accomplishment or emotion they cannot find outside of a play-space. However, again similar to escapist motivations, the pervasive operation of neoliberal ideology can make this a difficult thing to accomplish. If the play is corrupted then play may not be

sufficiently separate from everyday reality to satisfy motivations coming from seeking a certain experience from involvement.

Identity formation is a task of the individual in contemporary society and play can potentially be a means through which identity can be found or formed. Bauman examines the process of 'individualisation' in society which he notes 'consists of transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' to a 'task' (2000, p. 31). Individuals have to define themselves within neoliberalism and previous ways in which identity could be established lean on a stability (potentially relating to employment) that no longer exists for many. The mechanical and narrative components of the majority of AAA video games lend themselves to identity formation and can appeal to people looking to define themselves. This connection between video game consumption and Bauman's notion of liquid modernity has been highlighted by Molesworth and Watkins (2014). What play takes place and the presence of an avatar can both be used to develop a sense of self. However, players can only define themselves in relation to what they can consume via the format. The business ontology that was discussed in Chapter 1 alters the understanding of play in a video game and as such how the tools of identity formation within the game can be used. Notions of identity in the video game will be analysed at length in Chapter 5: Identity, for now it can be said that the player, due to the business ontology, will carry with them notions of how the tools of identity formation should be used.

Escapism

Research on the reasons why video games are played suggests that video games are used to 'relax, escape from real life, or to avoid real life problems' (Caplan, et al., 2009, p. 1315). As mentioned earlier, this is a likely motivation for play given the intensification of work within neoliberal structures and feelings of alienation experienced. Therefore, the player, as a subject within neoliberalism, seeks to play a video game in order to remove themselves from conditions within it, such as an intensification of work or unstable conditions and social relations.

Escapism as a quality of video games often goes unquestioned in its validity as games are so often considered part of leisure activity. One potential issue with escapism is the phrase itself, 'escape' implies a retreat from something, and it needs to be established as to whether a video game can supply this, even if our aim is to escape. The digital space in which the game takes place may not be sufficiently separate from the physical reality of the player. In asking the question, 'what are we running from?' Calleja notes that escapism 'presupposes a movement to a more desirable place or situation but...also implies an eventual return to the point of departure' (2010, p. 348). The player can want to escape something with the knowledge that they will eventually have to return, with escapist motivations often being accompanied by awareness they will cause a temporal disruption of circumstance. Calleja goes on to state that games are not 'inherently escapist' and that the 'value judgement implied in the term escapism is always dependent on the context in which it is exercised not the form of activity itself' (2010, p. 350). This infers that context is key, and so if a digital space is still grounded within circumstances from the physical space the escape will not be totally successful. As highlighted by Calleja 'one can be just as readily escapist through their job as they are playing a game' (2010, p. 350). I agree in part with Calleja's analysis, video games themselves are not inherently escapist but, in ideal conditions, play is. Separation is a formal characteristic of play, it should be separate from the reality outside of it and as such playing should always be able to satisfy escapist motivations. The reason video games are not inherently escapist is due to external factors, such as being part of a network of technologies designed to reproduce neoliberal ideology.

Molesworth studies video games as an escape from routine, identifying different forms of escapism. Molesworth's work illustrates 'aspects of escapism through play, specifically: nostalgia; 'everyday' daydreams; media-derived fantasies, and; virtual tourism' (2009, p. 378). Molesworth general identification of an escapist motivation as an escape from routine relates to neoliberalism. Players are potentially aware they cannot literally escape but the desire to escape or change conditions is what motivates their play. The routine of life itself can be broken up by something like play of a video game. The further forms of escapism that Molesworth identifies are

contextual, they would each depend on what the video game is that is being played. For example, 'everyday' daydreams would apply to something like *FIFA 19* (2018), with the player pretending to be a footballer and the life that would come along with such a profession.

Molesworth states that video game consumption can be viewed as a 'significant trajectory of experiential economies where the market provides commodities that allow for the actualisation of the imagination' (2009, p. 378). The play within video games allows for 'daydreams to come true...in other words, daydreams are bolted onto material objects or experiences' (Molesworth, 2009, p. 378). Video games here are viewed as something that the market provides, realising that there is a general desire from subjects within neoliberalism to escape. Video games, and the play they enable, allow individuals to realise this desire to change their conditions. They are a consumer object that the individual uses to satisfy a desire to experience something they have imagined. Molesworth's specific example in relation to this is to have daydreams come true, the video game supplies a chance to act out the daydream through play.

Video games can also be thought of in terms of Baudrillard's work on consumption. Baudrillard's notion for the basis of our consumption further reinforces the notion that the space provided by video games offers something that cannot be found outside of them:

The systematic and limitless process of consumption arises from the disappointed demand for totality that underlies the project of life. In their ideality sign-objects are all equivalent and may multiply infinitely; indeed, they **must multiply** in order at every moment to make up for a reality that is absent. Consumption is irreplaceable, in the last reckoning, because it is founded on a **lack** (1999, p. 205, emphasis added).

Consumption relies on the individual feeling as though they are lacking something that can be attained through their consumption. The lack upon which consumption

is founded is exacerbated within neoliberalism, for example, it was noted that identity becomes a task rather than a given. The individual within neoliberalism can lack agency, a sense of identity, stability and more, so there is plenty of opportunity for consumer objects to address these lacks. This affirms the observation of the previous paragraph that video games are a consumer object that is there to allow for the actualisation of wants and desires.

Molesworth uses interviews to discuss this and one interviewee describes how she uses *The Sims* (2000) to live out a version of their own life “but it’s perfect” (2009, p. 381). This preferred reflection of a lived reality involves not having to have a job and having lots of money, yet for this to be achieved the player had to use cheat codes. As has been noted however, cheating is still playing. A happy life free of work, with a background of financial security, is most easily imaginable in the play that is enabled by a video game. Video games like *The Sims* series could be viewed as symptomatic of a socio-economic reality where people have to imagine a world of consistent employment, stable finances, and home ownership, essentially a world that is not neoliberal. It is significant however that the player had to cheat in order to play this way. Intentionality of the design would have presented a more neoliberal simulacrum; the player would have their avatar find employment and better themselves through tasks that raised their productivity to achieve the lifestyle they wanted.

Molesworth concludes with an important point:

To reduce players to a predictable ‘alienated consumer’ script would be a denial of their complex and nuanced life-worlds. Emancipation from the market may be an impossibility for these consumers, as might the material actualization of an ‘ideal’ life, but their skill and success in ‘making the best of it’ might still be acknowledged (2009, p. 383).

Not everyone playing a video game will be alienated, frustrated or seeking to escape something but each player will have their own complex reality that will motivate

them to play a video game. The same can be said for other media. For example, Batat and Wohlfeil note how 'the level and nature of a consumer's experienced immersion into the movie narrative is determined less by age or gender, but by one's very private motives and interests' (2009, p. 376). The motivation of the player is a relative mystery but significance lies within media's ability to offer the individual a chance to attain what they are motivated by. Whilst the influence of neoliberal ideology may not be the motivating factor to play, it will limit the ability to play given its influence on AAA video games that are produced under it. That factor makes the escape difficult or impossible.

Within Molesworth's conclusion is also the idea of emancipation from the market being potentially impossible and this is all the more pertinent now given the development of AAA video games since 2009 when his work was published. The previously mentioned microtransactions that are present in the *FIFA* series are becoming commonplace in many AAA video games. The market or sites of consumption have become a large part of the play in AAA video games (this will be developed further in Chapter 7: Ideology). Whilst the motivations of players are unique and complex, the opportunities they are given in terms of play are limited to what they are able to consume. Motivations have to be made to fit what games are there to play. A player's ability to make the best of it is constrained by their socio-economic circumstance, mainly the form of their time and money, and if their motivations match the games currently on the market. Escapism, as a motivation to change conditions temporarily, is anchored within these experiences and so players can experience limited satisfaction in relation to it. As Molesworth and Watkins highlight the 'enjoyable nature of games as a leisure pursuit can become overshadowed by an obligation to achieve at the same time as distancing players from areas of their lives where progress is not experienced' (2014, p. 510). This relates to neoliberal subjectivities fostered within wider society, as Molesworth and Watkins also observe in 'neoliberal modes of governance, the subject must take charge of their own well-being, self-actualizing through their own labour' (2014, p. 512). The play in the video game is governed by similar motivating factors that see the formation of a cult of work (developed in Chapter 3). The motivation of escapism

is not only limited by socio-economic conditions, but problematised as a concept when neoliberal ideology is present within the play-space.

In studying Baudrillard's notion of leisure, Rojek notes that 'there is a price to pay' for leisure in consumer society and that is 'the disappearance of privacy and the means of escape' (Rojek, 2000, p. 276). This notion of privacy disappearing was observed by Rojek in 2000, and I would argue this has only become more prominent. The collapse of leisure and labour domains and increased prominence of networked technologies (e.g. smart phones and multimedia game consoles) make genuinely private spaces harder to find and maintain. A private space is important to leisure as it allows the individual to spend their leisure time how they would like to without unnecessary external influence. This further expands upon this thesis' reasoning for focussing on AAA video games in Chapter 1, a potentially private digital space for play is likely to be networked as more video games include always online features. As well as this, there is the presences of microtransactions that make the play space a site of further consumption. Neoliberalism can constrain what play a AAA video game can offer to the player. As mentioned earlier, games can be used to avoid 'real life problems' (Caplan, et al., 2009, p. 1315) but what if your real-life problem is financial in nature? What if your problem is the stress of work but AAA video games contain increasingly rationalised and objective driven play? Similarly, Denegri-Knott and Molesworth observe that the software of video games spaces contributes to 'an understanding of how software ultimately reconfigures consumer desire practices into a management process, where the focus is not necessarily daydreaming activity or material commodities per se, but rather the software itself' (2013, p. 1576). This comes about from the play-space enabled by the AAA video game is organised. The digital space created is one which is embedded within wider neoliberal structures and will therefore effect what that software is and how it appears to the player. I argue that this is a result of neoliberalism being woven into the architecture of the AAA video game. The structures of the game itself are ideological, fostering certain subjectivities and actions from the player. This is significant as the desire to escape is enabled by a form of consumption. The necessity of escape via consumption grounds the player within neoliberal structures.

Calleja notes that it is problematic to think of the physical and digital worlds as separate stating that this dichotomy of a 'here/there...misrepresents our mode of being in the everyday world' as the digital is a 'crucial aspect of contemporary reality' (2011, p. 183). The AAA video game's digital space is not a separate one to physical reality; material circumstances can affect an ability to play in digital space. Huizinga's idea of play being a 'stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own' (1949, p. 8) becomes potentially difficult if not impossible to see in this scenario due to the presence of neoliberal ideology.

The potential limits of escapism itself aside, there is an obvious meaningful experience that is sought by players with this motivation. They desire to separate themselves from their lived reality and experience a different one, either to alleviate the effects of their lived reality or experience something they cannot in their lived reality. Players are likely aware that this will be a temporal experience. The pervasive nature of neoliberal ideology makes this sort of separation incredibly difficult if not impossible. Digital realities and physical ones are not separate, especially when access to digital spaces are rooted in an individual's socio-economic circumstances and other everyday circumstance relating to time and money.

Involvement

Atkinson described having a motive as 'a disposition to strive for a certain kind of satisfaction' (1957, p. 360). Therefore, what could be motivating the player to play a video game is to attain a sense of satisfaction. As noted earlier, Calleja developed models of player involvement that analyse these different forms of player involvement in video games. This section of the thesis will review this analysis and discuss potential player motivations. A select few of the models of involvement that are developed by Calleja are kinaesthetic involvement, affective involvement, and ludic involvement. These three have been highlighted as they are broadly reflective of the different ways the player can involve themselves with the video game. These forms of involvement range from player movement, player emotions, and player thought and behaviour.

Calleja looks at kinaesthetic player involvement which, in relation to video games, refers to the player's awareness and learning of their movement when inputting commands when they are playing. On the PlayStation, the player often uses a handheld controller:

Figure 1: A PlayStation Controller for the PlayStation 3 version of the console.

The controller in figure 1 has the input commands labelled. For example, if the player was playing one of the *FIFA* video games with the default control settings they move the digital avatar (in this case a football player) they are controlling with the left analog stick. They would press the blue cross button to pass the ball, press the purple square button to lob the ball or slide tackle, and press the red circle button to shoot the ball or perform a standing tackle. These are not all the input options for the *FIFA* video games but provide an example of player input on the controller corresponding to the action of the avatar within the video game. Keogh describes controllers or 'input devices' as 'the translator through which the videogame comprehends the player' (2018, p. 77). All of these inputs from the player will require precise timing and knowledge of what to input and when, and the correct pressure to apply to the appropriate command. The player has to acquire a mental and physical knowledge of the game to play it in the way it was intended by the developers. Recent entries in the *FIFA* series, for example, have introduced "timed shooting". Here the player will press the "circle" button twice, first to begin the shooting animation and again shortly after. If timed correctly (the margin of error is within a couple of frames of the animation) it improves the player's shooting ability, adding 'an extra layer of finesse to your shot' (Green, 2019). This is indicative of how the player's mastery and learning of controls leads to certain advantages in the playing of some video games and provide the player themselves with evidence of their ability in the playing of the game. An ability to learn or master controls is 'fundamental' to accessing the expressive ability of the video game medium (Keogh, 2018, p. 77). Accessing most of what video games have to offer in terms of experience requires a competency of the input commands.

Calleja notes that the continuity of control between player and avatar has the 'potential to awaken kinaesthetic sensations in players that make the game playing experience pleasurable in its own right' (2011, p. 68). There is also the possibility to derive aesthetic enjoyment from seeing the command inputs of the player performed by the avatar within the video game. Giddings and Kennedy note the responsiveness of avatars is 'satisfying to the player in a way that is hard to describe or explain' (2008, p. 26). They summarise that 'extraordinary moments of visual and kinaesthetic pleasure' (2008, p. 31) can be found in the playing of a video game. The very act of playing the video game can be reason enough in itself to want to play, the input required and the feeling this generates can be pleasant for the player in the physical sense. For example, the earlier discussed timed shootings in the *FIFA* series could lead to the player scoring a visibly impressive goal, mixing the pleasure found in being responsible for the command that led to something aesthetically pleasing.

The command of the controls of a video game is linked to the concept of mastery. Greene identifies mastery as 'the feeling that we have a greater command of reality, other people, and ourselves' (2012, p. 2). Mastery can be more about attaining a high skill level in something rather than having control over something as Greene's definition suggests, although video games do often allow the player to control a digital avatar. Hanson notes that 'mastery beckons the player of *Don't Starve*', which is a survival game, and that this mastery is attained through 'compulsive repetition' (2018, p. 111). Hanson goes on to note that 'repetition of an action or an experience suggests the repressed desire for the satisfaction gained from perfecting that action or experience' (2018, p. 133). There is a simple pleasure in becoming better at something and that is something that many video games can offer to a player.

Calleja also studies affective involvement of the player with the video game. Calleja summarises affective involvement as the dimension of player involvement accounting for 'the rhetorical strategies of affect that are either purposefully designed into a game or precipitated by the individual player's interpretation of in-game events' (2011, p. 146). Essentially, an emotive response can come about through the intentionality of the developers of the video game or the way in which

the player chooses to play. To study this dimension of player involvement we can revisit an example of gameplay given in Chapter 1, the white phosphorous sequence in *Spec Ops: The Line* (2012). As was noted, there can be a discrepancy between the desired effect of those who create the video game and the player of the video game. Calleja notes how video games can use a 'combination of graphical, audio, and physics techniques' to 'increase excitement' (2011, p. 142), with the "white phosphorous" sequence in *Spec Ops: The Line* doing exactly this. As the player is firing the mortar during gameplay there is the audio of bullets being fired and whizzing past their position as their fellow soldiers within the game are talking to them with suggestions and commands like "preparing to fire", "kill them!", and "burn them!" to create a sense of urgency. As the cinematic sequence begins the bullet and explosion noises stop and is replaced by harrowing screams of wounded people that were in the path of the player's mortar fire (specifically the player can hear shouts of "hello...is anyone there?", "I can't feel my legs!", and "please help!"). This is a stark contrast to the preceding sequence of play. As the player's avatar discovers the charred corpses of the civilians, a sinister soundtrack begins to play as the fellow soldiers' voices fade into the background screaming that the player's character has "turned them into killers". The combination of visuals, audio, and the mechanics of play is clearly designed to illicit an emotional response from the player. This is similar to the use of soundtrack during Willem Dafoe's character's dramatic death during *Platoon* (1986). The soundtrack that accompanies the death (Barber's *Adagio for Strings* (1936)) is described as a 'signpost for sorrow in popular imagination' (Tsioulcas, 2019), and as such it is obvious the intended effect of this scene is one of sorrow for the viewer.

Keogh highlights the significance of not only kinaesthetic qualities of video games but also the audiovisual qualities in providing the player with a meaningful affective experience. Keogh notes 'the irreducible symbiosis of this gestural signification with audiovisual engagement' when stating that input commands prompt responses in the player in tandem with other factors (2018, p. 110). To refer again to *Spec Ops: The Line*, part of the sorrow that is intended to be prompted in the player is not just from the audiovisual components described above but from the fact that the player input the commands themselves to fire the white phosphorous that caused such

destruction. Each component of the video game works in tandem to prompt a response.

The white phosphorous sequence in *Spec Ops: The Line* is clearly designed to be harrowing for the player; I argue that the player could play in search of this sort of emotional experience. It seems counterintuitive to say that one would play in order to prompt sorrow but play is complex and is carried out towards a myriad of ends. Play does not need to have a conventionally positive response from the player to still provide a meaningful experience to them. In relation to this, Brock discusses failure in *Dark Souls* (2011). He observes how the death of a player's avatar in the video game is a teaching moment and states how death 'helps players transform the experience of failure into something therapeutic: a valuable lesson' (2016, p. 175). Ultimately, the 'abject experience of failure' can result in the playing building a deep personal connection with a video game (Brock, 2016, p. 175). Player involvement with a video game can result in conventionally positive or negative results but from each a meaningful experience can be obtained. Again, despite the somewhat brutal messaging of *Dark Souls* with "You Died" appearing on the screen along with the distinctive audio accompaniment of a piercing scream when the player's mastery of the controls fails them, there is a meaningful experience for the player. As was noted by Keogh, the mastery of the controls is only half the story (2018, pp. 110-111). The player's involvement with the game via input control and its relationship to audiovisual components create a series of events that form the player's experience with the video game. Player involvement with a video game can be deeply personal and so it takes multiple forms. Whether it is in a sorrowful narrative sequence or being consistently punished for failure, meaningful experience is where the player finds it. An issue of this emerges when a deeply personal experience is altered by neoliberal ideology within the design and structure of the AAA video game. The presence of ideology in how the play-space is organised potentially alters how the individual engages with the play-space. Rather than explore experiences that are unproductive the player may feel compelled to justify their actions within the play-space as being in line with neoliberal notions of productivity.

The intended effect of play can potentially differ as the player could derive a different experience from other elements of the game. Mosca states 'games are constituted by players' intentionality: I could make use of Tetris...without playing it and I could conversely play with Excel...rather than making use of it for working' (Mosca, 2017, p. 600). The player of *Spec Ops: The Line* could make use of the white phosphorous scene through the heightened sense of urgency and excitement during their mortar fire and their command of the game's controls. They could feel satisfied that they have mastery of the game's mechanics and exhilarated by the sound of gunfire. This illustrates the ability to derive contrasting experiences from the same sequence of gameplay. Both are technically valid and could motivate the player's desire to play the same video game. The difference between the intentionality of the designer to present an anti-war rhetoric and the potential for the player to experience the play as fun and thrilling not only represents the complicated relationship between play and rules but also the motivations of the player. Either way, player motivation can be motivated by the wish to experience something that can be brought about by the rhetorical strategies deployed by different video games. This can be referred to as a ludonarrative dissonance that exists within some video games and studied by Mitchell (2018).

Calleja describes ludic involvement as concerning a 'player's engagement with the choices made in the game and the repercussions of those choices' and that it is 'one of the most fundamental cornerstones of a game' (2011, p. 165). Ludic involvement highlights the fact that the player's choices and actions in the video game have repercussions and consequences. It is in essence the very act of playing a game. Calleja also highlights the sense of satisfaction involved with completing objectives in video games (2011, p. 159) and goes on to note that there is also often a reward for the player meeting these objectives. These rewards can take multiple forms and Calleja gives the example of *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008) and the way it regards the player for progressing the scripted narrative (2011, p. 163). To apply this again to *Spec Ops: The Line*, the player upon completing the white phosphorous gameplay sequences is rewarded with the cinematic section that progresses the scripted narrative, carrying on their enjoyment of the narrative in the game, or rather their

enjoyment of having achieved or completed something. Likewise, if their play is motivated for the thrill of shooter-based gameplay, the ludic involvement can be found in the consequences of their shooting during gameplay. The player of *Spec Ops: The Line* can receive an achievement (these were discussed in Chapter 1) for killing four enemies with a shotgun in under 10 seconds, rewarding the player for their actions and command of the video game's controls.

To make generalisations from the analysis of kinaesthetic, affective, and ludic involvement in video games, we can discern that player motivation is often linked to experience. From the act of inputting commands on a controller to the emotional reaction to scripted narrative to the consequences of playing a game, it all revolves around the player experiencing something due to the video game. Players of video games then can be described as playing a video game because they are seeking a meaningful experience. As was highlighted in a previous section however, there exists the potential for the influence of neoliberal ideology to be present within the play-space. I argue that this could limit the potentials of play as neoliberal subjectivities, rather than playful ones, will be fostered. For example, the player may justify or form their involvement with the video game around ideas of productivity rather than playing without purpose.

Identity Formation

Video games offer the player potential tools for assisting in the formation of a sense of self. This is especially appealing in the context of neoliberalism, as identity is something which becomes a shifting and unstable concept. As was noted earlier, the responsibility to define oneself falls onto the individual in a liquid age (Bauman, 2000, p. 31), so subjects within neoliberal structures must find ways to define themselves. Bauman observed how 'the way human beings understand the world tends to be at all times *praxeomorphic*: it is always shaped by the know-how of the day, by what people can do and how they usually go about doing it' (2000, p. 56). He makes this observation in relation to what he calls 'heavy capitalism' and 'light capitalism'. Heavy capitalism is encapsulated in the Fordist era, as both workers and capital were both 'fixed to the ground' with the worker's mobility limited as they had a geographically

fixed place of work. Light capitalism is better encapsulated by today's neoliberal society where capital is mobile whilst the workers are 'immobilized' and the places they were once fixed to have lost their solidity (Bauman, 2000, pp. 58-59). This trend is also highlighted by Fisher, who states how 'the 'rigidity' of the Fordist production line gave way to a new 'flexibility', a word that will send chills down the spine of every worker today' (2009, p. 33). This 'light capitalism' and trait of a flexible workforce is identifiable as a characteristic of neoliberalism. It is this aspect of flexibility within neoliberalism that can produce a condition of anxiety and insecurity within individuals. AAA video games, in allowing for different experiences, offer the player the opportunity to engage in a form of identity construction, potentially providing an experience that can meet the desire for identity. The video game is a space or location where the instability can temporally cease and offer the player something to ground themselves within.

It was previously discussed in the chapter why the term player is used rather than gamer, but the potential appeal of being someone that plays a game (outside of the cultural weight of the gamer label) can also itself appeal. In effect, the player can be motivated to be a player, not necessarily a gamer. Much in the way that the act of playing a game provides kinaesthetic or ludic satisfaction, it can potentially provide temporal identity of being someone at play. The playing of a video game provides a role and structures to a player, and in a liquid age this is appealing, offering a potential remedy to the 'flexibility' highlighted in the previous paragraph. Muriel and Crawford highlight that 'the video gamer identity is a fluid, flexible, and unstable construct' that can take multiple forms and influence someone's identity to varying degrees (2018, p. 150). The tag of being a 'gamer' can be rejected or made to fit the situation of individual players, who just wish to be players of a video game. Just because they play video games does not mean they are a gamer. Muriel and Crawford for example ask two people who play games if they define themselves as gamers. One replies "Yeah!" and the other "No. Definitely a thousand times I would say no, no!" (2018, p. 148) . The player can think of themselves as someone who plays video games in many different ways and need to not bring the cultural identifier of gamer into their sense of self. Muriel and Crawford offer a post-identity hypothesis, positing that the

contradictions and conundrums caused by the idea of being a gamer means that it is an 'identity that does not give a sense of identity' (2018, p. 167). I agree with this and argue that, additionally, playing video games allows for the sort of fluid identity formation necessitated by neoliberal society. Play, as an activity, can become a tool in identity construction in myriad ways.

The post-identity hypothesis is defined by three elements; 'short facts, the creation of communities without anything in common, and the rupture of defining axes of identity' (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, p. 168). It is within the elements of short facts and the rupture of the axes of identity that lies the significance of identity formation within play. 'Short facts' refer to short pieces of information presented as way of attempting to define yourself or someone. The example of contestants entering the house on reality TV show *Big Brother UK 2014* having three short facts super imposed onto their entrance screen is used. Likewise, the video game *Watch Dogs* (2014) uses short facts, especially when non-playable characters are highlighted by the player. Phrases such as "dyslexic", "explosives expert" and others are used to illustrate the key features of these characters when they appear (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, pp. 169-170). Video games provide these short facts in abundance. The player can say they are someone who enjoys playing a particular game (e.g. *FIFA* player). The player could incorporate their mastery of a game into their identity (e.g. Level 50 *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (2014) player). Likewise, the video game can provide short facts through narrative. For example, in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018) the player's avatar is a mercenary. Here the player effectively *is* a mercenary called *Kassandra* or *Alexios* as they play and control the actions of the avatar. The player is given the opportunity to form fragments of their identity from what the video game offers them.

Muriel and Crawford note the old coordinates of identity such as nation, gender, and class are 'decentred'³⁰ and, as such, 'individuals cannot be defined by something that

³⁰ This notion of decentres refers to how identity becomes unbounded from the individual, in a similar way to how play has become unbound from leisure, within neoliberalism. An individual's identity is drawn from multiple external sources rather than themselves. Identity is something that is drawn from external social, cultural, and political factors. This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 5: Identity.

encompasses everything they are, they can be defined by anything that describes them in a particular moment' (2018, p. 170). This includes the playing of a video game at a particular moment in time. A video game player can say they are a level 50 player (in doing so reflecting their relationship to the game as either a player of it or a player of certain level of skill), or if they desire deeper immersion through affective involvement they could fix their identity to that of their avatar. Beyond saying that are the player of a game or a specific level, the player could say they are their avatar; all are valid ways in which identity can be formed through play.

Muriel and Crawford summarise that identity has been approached using two axes of analysis, one being 'the form and shape of identity: is it solid, consolidated, stable, and permanent? Or is it fragmented, weak, unstable, temporary, multiple, and liquid?' and the other 'how identity is assembled: is identity a position, a starting point, from where individuals are able to enunciate or act? Or is it rather a point of arrival, the non-preexisting outcome of different associations, mediations, and processes?' (2018, p. 173). These axes have ruptured as the category of identity has become 'overflowed by the tides of the times, incapable of containing a promiscuous and ever-changing social reality' with the concept of identity for individuals becoming 'an experience of identity, not an identity itself' (Muriel & Crawford, 2018, p. 174). The idea of identity being an experience is significant; if the player is motivated to play a game to have a meaningful experience, then having a temporal identity whilst at play could be incredibly meaningful. The tools of identity formation that a video game can offer (such as level systems and an avatar) offer a reassuring form of stability through which a meaningful experience can be had. I would add to this that neoliberal structures foster notions of identity centred on productivity and entrepreneurship (this will be developed further in Chapter 3). The significance of this is that the use of AAA video games (which are embedded within neoliberal structures) to allow the player to explore different forms of identity will just serve to reinforce neoliberal subjectivities.

Molesworth and Watkins use Bauman's notion of liquid modernity to theorise adult video game consumption as 'individualised, 'episodic progress', rooted in a need for

a life in which things 'get better' and time is usefully spent, coupled with a failure to fully actualise this elsewhere' (2014, p. 511). As was noted in the work on escapism, Molesworth and Watkins highlight that within neoliberal structures individuals are responsible for their own wellbeing. Wellbeing in these circumstances is often achieved through self-actualisation via labour or labour-like activities. I noted this observation earlier in relation to escapism, as this motivation can be characterised as wanting to enter a space in which the normal restrictions applied to an individual are (or can be) suspended or altered. This motivation to play a video game is also related to identity formation. In relation to Bauman's work, Molesworth and Watkins observe that 'individuals who strive for progress because they experience a lack purpose in life may come to desire instant gratification through individualised episodes of progress distinct from any wider and more meaningful progress projects' (2014, p. 512). These individualised episodes of progress can be found in the structures of video games, whether it being increasing character levels or the unfolding of a narrative. Within the neoliberal contexts, video games can provide an opportunity for the player to engage in an activity that sees them *grow* or *advance*, allowing the individual to think of themselves as bettering themselves as human capital.

Giddens states that 'to be a human being is to know, virtually all of the time, in terms of some description or another, both what one is doing and why one is doing it' (1991, p. 35). With the decentring of institutions and social life, uncertainty is a feature of people's everyday existence. Within neoliberal structures, more and more tasks fall to the individual and external pressures can make identity formation difficult. The identity of the player in play is appealing to the player as they can effectively choose to consume different elements of identity formation, experiences different forms of identity depending on what they play. Video games are potentially a remedy to instability.³¹ The inherent structure provided by the rules that enable play is potentially what is appealing to the player, which contrasts with the liquid nature of neoliberalism. Bauman notes how 'uncertainty must now be overcome by one's own

³¹ I would like to add that this is separate to uncertainty as a formal characteristic of play. Uncertainty refers to outcomes but the activity itself can provide a stable basis for thought and action.

means; the scarcity of *because-ofs* must be compensated for by home-made *in-order-tos*' (1995, p. 113). Video games are potentially one of the in-order-tos for the individual to construct part of their identity. The case of the video game *Bloodborne* (2015) helping someone to transition gender and choose a new name is a case of how this can be a positive (Martinez, 2019). For this player, a meaningful experience was found in anchoring themselves to their avatar. The video game offered a means of exploring and finding ways to think about identity and provided a way in which the self can be constructed.

Baudrillard states that 'to simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have' (1994, p. 3), which links to his work on consumption that was discussed earlier in the chapter. It was highlighted that consumption is founded upon a lack, the individual believing their reality to be absent of something would consume a product that would address this lack. Potentially, players engage with a simulated reality to look for something they cannot achieve or experience in their physical reality. As has been discussed, the video game can provide the tools for identity formation and so a sense of self can be formed around the structure of the video game more easily than it can be in an unstable, liquid everyday reality. Carrying this logic of simulation and compensating for lacks with consumer goods, we can again link to Bauman's notion of the task of identity falling to the individual (2000, p. 31) and the individual attempting to find their identity in what their consumer goods offer. The large number of different video games on the market offer many ways for players to begin identity formation through their play.

I argue that this form of identity formation through play is necessitated due to the violence done to the self by neoliberal ideology. To help conceptualise using video games as identity formation, it is useful to think about J.G. Ballard's book *The Atrocity Exhibition* (2014). The central character takes on multiple names and roles in attempting to confront the violent nature of consumer society, media spectacle, and the technological landscape. The violence with which the book deals is, as Fisher notes, the 'culmination of a decade whose guiding logic has been one of violence' (1999, p. 101). This violence within neoliberalism is not necessarily physical, rather it

is a violence that deconstructs notions of selfhood down to that of someone who should work and be working. Within neoliberalism everything becomes fragmented and liquid, with individuals losing ideas of what they are beyond the sense of needed to work and operate according to economic criteria. Within video games is the ability to adopt fragments of identities, have a different name or choose a name, take on a role or choose a role, a potential remedy to the discussed violence. Video games offer the player an experience and the ability to drift between different kinds of experience in order to help them make sense of different things.

However, neoliberal ideology motivating thought and behaviour offers a form of security as it will ensure maximum economic output from action. It will seek the same of play, rationalising play to the point of it being a value obsessive act that is in some way economically productive for the player. This can potentially limit the meaningful experience a player can find and rather serve to reproduce neoliberal ideology. Play will be there to serve to assist in the fostering of a neoliberal subjectivity of the individual rather than be able to develop different notions of the self. This is significant as it limits the potentials of play.

Conclusions

This chapter set out to establish a general motivation for the play of AAA video games. The general motivation for the play of video games can be identified as the player seeking a meaningful experience through their engagement with the video game. Suits suggested that 'utopia is intelligible, and...game playing is what makes utopia intelligible' (2005, p. 154), in effect stating that player's game playing is part of what makes life worth living, providing meaning. Play can potentially allow an individual to move outside of their lived reality as much as they are able to, do something unproductive in the economic sense, and engage in behaviour that is not possible outside the game. Through play, an individual can find meaning, as they are able to think and behave in ways they are not able to outside of play.

The potential motivations (escapism, involvement, and identity formation) that have been discussed in this chapter have been used to illustrate the myriad of ways in

which players can go into video games seeking a meaningful experience. Escapism is understood as the player attempting to separate themselves from everyday lived reality. Involvement as a motivation sees the player looking for meaningful experience within the act of play itself, either through their command of a video game or the emotions the video game allows them to experience. Identity formation, a task that falls to the individual within contemporary society, can be carried out through the act of play. Video games allow for different methods of identity formation within both their procedural and narrative rhetoric (as was discussed in Chapter 1), as well as the act of playing itself potentially being part of identity formation.

The discussed motivations of play can come about due to the lived reality that results from the influence of neoliberal ideology (such as the intensification of work). However, as well as motivating the desire for play, neoliberal structures can alter what play is and so limit the player's ability to achieve the meaningful experience they seek. The ability to achieve a further escape can be limited or altered by the collapse of the labour and leisure domains (this will be further detailed in Chapter 3: Neoliberalism and Play). Play becomes unbound from leisure and the always online features of many AAA video games limit a player's ability to thoroughly separate their time playing from their everyday reality. Neoliberalism organises life around economic criteria and as such the player's engagement with a video game can be subject to these criteria. This can affect the experiences gained through involvement with aspects of play, with the player rationalising their actions and effectively denying their meaningful experience. Prior to engagement with the video game neoliberal ideology will have influenced the player's sense (or lack) of self. The space provided by the video game assisting identity formation can again be limited if what is on offer to the player is just further means of thinking and operating according to economic criteria.

Chapter 3: Neoliberalism and Play

The purpose of this chapter is to develop an understanding of how neoliberalism operates as a dominant societal ideology. As well as this, it will provide detail on how a process of neoliberalisation has occurred within society, making specific note of its relation to play. The chapter will begin by giving an overview of the theoretical development of neoliberalism from the middle of the 20th Century and the introduction of neoliberal practices and policies from the 1970s onwards. As a result of the implementation of such practices and policies neoliberalism was established as a hegemonic ideology, with far reaching cultural, social, and political consequences.

A process of neoliberalisation will also be detailed in this chapter. Neoliberalisation is the process through which neoliberal ideology comes to influence thought and behaviour. As was noted in the Introduction, neoliberalism is 'not a single system' and has many variants (Hall, 2011, p. 708). The form of neoliberalism that is understood in this work will be detailed by studying the work of Fisher (2009) (2018) and Bauman (2000), before revisiting the work of Caillois (2001) to link this understanding to play. Fisher's and Bauman's work has been selected as it can be used to imagine the structural and individual elements of neoliberal ideology, revealing how neoliberalism works in broad terms as well as in relation to the individual person within its structures.

The chapter will detail how processes of neoliberalisation have resulted in a cult of work, and how the institution of work and the performance of it are lauded within neoliberalism. Work spills out from usual domains of labour due to this, and distinct labour and leisure spheres are not clearly discernible. Conditions produced from this collapse of labour and leisure domains will be studied in this chapter and it will be highlighted how these conditions foster a sense of subjectivity known as the entrepreneurial self. The entrepreneurial self is a form of selfhood in which the individual assesses their thought, action, and relations according to economic criteria. The functioning of the gig economy will be used as an example to

demonstrate the collapse of labour and leisure domains and the fostering of entrepreneurial subjectivity.

How the collapse of the labour and leisure domains and the entrepreneurial self specifically relate to play will be analysed next in the chapter. Caillois' work relating to his concerns about play being affected by everyday life will be studied in order to theorise upon how play can become corrupted. Brock's work on esports, which references Caillois, will be used to demonstrate how play can change due to external factors. I will then argue that play can also be affected in the private setting due to external factors as well as in the esports setting. This will be done by developing the concept of endless play. Endless play emerges due to the collapse of the labour and leisure domains, with play becoming unbound from leisure and transforming into something that can be understood and undertaken according to economic criteria. In this context, play becomes something that will serve to reproduce neoliberal ideology rather than be an activity that takes place outside of neoliberal structures and imperatives.

This chapter will conclude with a section on why it is so important to identify and oppose neoliberalism, and how play could do that. The work in this thesis is primarily concerned with the corruption of play but neoliberalism is also corrupting in itself. Non-economic activity being understood in economic terms is capable of producing misery for many, as thought and actions have to be reconciled and rationalised in ways that can be unhelpful in numerous ways. For example, conditions of precarity are fostered within neoliberal structures, the colonisation of leisure by work is one such instance as it can promote anxiety and stress. I argue there is a moral imperative to oppose neoliberalism and further neoliberalisation due to its tendency to produce misery. Play could be used to oppose neoliberal ways of being as one of its formal characteristics is that it should be separate from everyday reality. This feature of play can allow the player to think and act in ways they cannot in their everyday reality, as they would be subject to a new set of rules and conditions. The player can embrace uncertainty and unproductiveness, allowing them to operate outside of a neoliberal common-sense.

Neoliberalism and Neoliberalisation

Harvey's work (2005) charts the development of neoliberalism towards being the dominant ideology in society. Harvey's definition of neoliberalism is as follows:

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (2005, p. 2).

Harvey identifies that from the 1970s there was a turn towards neoliberal political and economic policies ('deregulation, privatisation, and the withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision') which has seen neoliberalism become hegemonic and the 'common-sense' way in which we understand the world (Harvey, 2005, p. 3). Becoming 'common-sense' is ultimately the goal of all ideologies that seek to appear as a natural order of things as neoliberalism does. Neoliberal thought itself was developed by multiple theorists that founded the Mont Pelerin Society in 1947 with the aim of combatting threats to capitalism. The Mount Pelerin Society was made up of neoliberal scholars from different disciplines who wanted to 'oppose what they summarily described as collectivism and socialism, and to develop an agenda diverging from classical liberalism' (Plehwe, 2009, p. 6). Notable members were Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, and Milton Friedman (Harvey, 2005, pp. 19-20). These economists' works emphasised the importance of the free market, economic non-interventionism on the part of the state, the policy of monetarism and an emphasis on financial deregulation. The original neoliberal theorists took 'political ideals of human dignity and individual freedom as fundamental, as 'the central values of civilization'' and that these values were not only under threat from fascism, dictatorship, and communism but 'by all forms of state intervention that substituted collective judgements for those of individuals free to choose' (Harvey, 2005, p. 5).

Milton Friedman³² has been especially significant in neoliberalism's theoretical development due to his influence upon the Chicago School of economics,³³ which did a lot to establish economics as a scientific discipline and influence other academic disciplines and practices (Van Overtveldt, 2007) (Davies, 2015). Many of his key ideas are in his work *Freedom and Capitalism* (1962). It is in this work that Friedman states 'the wider are the range of activities covered by the market, the fewer are the issues on which explicitly political discussions are required' (1962, p. 24). This infers the more the market influences people's lives, the better, neatly encapsulating neoliberal thought. Friedman himself had a personal passion in seeing that public schools became privatised (Mirowski, 2019, p. 7), reflecting a desire to see market ethics in non-economic areas. Market forces would theoretically organise life in a rational way and prevent need for politics in shaping this element of life, such as education. Van Horn and Mirowski observe how this line of thought enforces the neoliberal idea that 'all human discourse was essentially just a sequence of disguised market transactions' (2009, p. 168).

In the 1970s, neoliberal theory began to become more influential due to its presence in think tanks and academic institutions, especially the University of Chicago (Harvey, 2005, p. 22). Hayek and Friedman winning Nobel Prizes in economics in 1974 and 1976 respectively was (along with the deregulation of the economy that began under the Carter Presidency in the US and the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 in the UK) part of what allowed neoliberal economics to become an established orthodoxy (Harvey, 2005, p. 22). The implementation of neoliberal policies was a global phenomenon, with states in different continents experiencing neoliberal practices and policies in different ways. The example of Chile was mentioned in the Introduction, with this neoliberalism being characterised by brutal repression by the Pinochet regime as the economy was deregulated. Immediately after the coup that saw Pinochet take power, economic reforms from the previous socialist government were reversed, with a series of privatisation and deregulation acts (Fischer, 2009, p.

³² Milton Friedman was an advisor to US president Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, demonstrating the level of political influence the neoliberal academics held.

³³ A school of thought in economics that believes that free markets, with minimal or no intervention from the state, is the best way to allocate resources.

318). The neoliberalisation in the UK was different to this, reflecting how neoliberalism looks and operates differently around the world. Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister of the UK in 1979 and this brought figures of the Institute of Economic Affairs³⁴ into power, a think-tank that served to build neoliberal influence in the country over in the long term (Plehwe, 2009, p. 29).

The complex development of neoliberalism has caused it to become a shifting signifier. Peck and Tickell note that neoliberalism is more of a 'Hydra' than a monolithic Goliath of global institutions as it has developed due to contestation with 'Keynesian economists, public-sector workers, antiprivatization campaigners, and traditional and social-democratic conservative politicians, among others' (2007, p. 27). As was the Chicago School's aim, neoliberalism has grown differently into multiple areas of human activity. The 'metastasization' of neoliberalism that took place from the 1990s is linked to local and national neoliberal projects that occurred in the 1980s, such as the policies enacted by the 1979 and 1983 Conservative Party manifestos in the UK (Peck & Tickell, 2007, pp. 30-32). Neoliberalism from here is often claimed to have a hegemonic influence on policy decisions among 'elite decision makers' around the globe (Harvey, 2005, p. 2) (Leitner, et al., 2007, p. 313). Political backing for the neoliberal ideology assisted the establishment of hegemony but there were also deep social and cultural changes in how individuals thought and behaved.

Extensive political changes through the 1970s and 1980s were not just how the neoliberal hegemony was established. The neoliberal hegemony and processes of neoliberalisation were continued during the 1990s, a decade that is claimed to have been post-political which is a phrase used as cover for the established neoliberal hegemony (Fisher & Gilbert, 2013, p. 90). How the hegemony appears and operates can differ globally. As was noted earlier, the neoliberalism of Chile was different to the neoliberalism of the UK. There are common threads, like the deregulation of the economy but the origin, operation and characteristics of the state itself were different and how the economic changes came about were different still. The collapse

³⁴ A London based neoliberal think-tank.

of the Soviet Union was an especially significant event in relation to the establishment of a neoliberal hegemony as it appeared that alternatives to market led societies were failing. Fisher has noted that when Margaret Thatcher first made the remark “there is no alternative” she was saying that there is no viable alternative to neoliberal capitalism and, due to the growth of neoliberalism as policy and ideology, ‘by 1997, there was no imaginable alternative’ (2013, p. 91), referring to the election of the New Labour government which continued with market focussed policies and ideas. Into the 2000s, wealth continued to concentrate upwards as more and more areas of life were opened to market forces and ideas. Mirowski highlights the worldwide trend of the concentration of wealth from the 1990s onwards as the ‘playing out of a neoliberal script’ (2009, p. 438).

The 2008 financial crash on the surface would appear to be something that could disrupt the neoliberal hegemony, but it has instead shown how resilient actually existing neoliberal ideology is.³⁵ Aalbers highlights how the financial crisis may ‘undermine the ideology of free markets, but it does not undermine the adaptive capacity inherent in neoliberalism. The big crisis of our time did not become a crisis of the hegemony of neoliberalism’ (2013, p. 1089). Neoliberalism, as an ideology of free markets, has been exposed as flawed after the global financial crash and decades of austerity governments around the world, especially in places like Greece and the UK. As was stated earlier, the ideology of neoliberalism normally infers a policy of non-intervention on the part of the state yet states often came to the aid of banks following the 2008 financial crisis. For example, in the US a \$700 billion bank bailout bill was signed (Amadeo, 2019). This is hardly the ideal function of a neoliberal free market economy which in theory should have allowed the banks to fail. Despite this, neoliberal ideology, as in the ideology that is dominant in society in shaping thought and action, is still strong. Neoliberal ideology as a pervasive atmosphere that motivates certain forms of action is evident in multiple sectors. For example, working conditions of non-managerial staff in higher education have been linked to neoliberal

³⁵ I take ‘actually existing neoliberal ideology’ to mean the way everyday life functions. The ‘actually existing’ element of the statement refers to what actually occurs within people’s lives. What they do, who they are, how they think, how they function, and so on. Essentially it refers to how everyday life is neoliberal.

forms of subjectivity (Mahony & Weiner, 2019, p. 565). As was stated, the financial crash of 2008 became a crisis of market ideology rather than neoliberal ideology.

In theory, market ideology and neoliberalism should be one and the same but, in terms of the functioning of the current neoliberal hegemony, this is not true. There is an actually existing form of neoliberal ideology that is separate from neoliberal free market ideology. I argue that this actually existing neoliberalism is best described through the work of Fisher and Bauman, specifically the concepts of capitalist realism and liquid modernity. These concepts consider both the structural and personal consequences of neoliberal ways of being.

Neoliberalism through Capitalist Realism and Liquid Modernity

Neoliberalism can be seen as an umbrella term for the nature of the current dominant ruling ideology and socio-economic system. It can be defined in many ways as a result of the broad nature of the term and explored through different disciplinary approaches. Brown describes neoliberalism as a 'loose and shifting signifier' and that the ideology has a quality of 'inconstancy and plasticity' (2015, pp. 20-21). It is this inconstancy that can make it an awkward concept to define but Dean summarises the operation of neoliberalism as 'redefining social and ethical life in accordance with economic criteria and expectations' and 'holds that human freedom is best achieved through the operation of markets' (2008, p. 48). Ultimately, it is an ideology that seeks to redefine human thought and action towards economic logics.

Dean's general definition is an effective starting place to establish an understanding of the neoliberalism that will be linked to the corruption of play. A background on this particular form of neoliberalism can be seen in the sort of ideas and concepts developed in the Chicago School of thought that was discussed earlier in the chapter. The Chicago School sought to expand the 'rationality of the market, the schemas of analysis it offers and the decision-making criteria it suggests, to domains which are not exclusively or not primarily economic', such as the family or penal policy (2008, p. 323). Essentially, the Chicago School set out to establish neoliberal hegemony to ensure that neoliberal ways of being governed as many social and personal relations

as possible. In 1979, Foucault recognised that there was the potential of an inversion of relations from the social to the economic within people's lives due to the expanding influence of neoliberal thought (2008, p. 240). As I also mentioned in the Introduction, Foucault identified that this school of thought generalised the economic logic of the market throughout the social system and this meant that economic analysis could be applied to non-economic processes, relations, and behaviours (2008, p. 243). Foucault gives the example of how neoliberals studied and analysed the mother-child relationship in economic terms, distilling it to an investment of time that produces the output of human capital in the form of the child's eventual ability to produce value (2008, pp. 243-244). Effectively, a non-economic set of relations becomes a case of investment and potential profit with this logic extending to almost everything in our current society, including play. It is this form of neoliberalism that this study identifies as being the dominant ideological structure of society.

To further develop what this understanding of neoliberalism is, concepts developed by Fisher (2009) and Bauman (2000) can be used to identify the influence of neoliberalism on technological infrastructure and the individual within the structures of this ideology. Capitalist realism and liquid modernity are the concepts that will be used to develop a critical understanding of the operation of neoliberal ideology. The discussion of these concepts will reveal that conditions are fostered in which alternatives to the market and economic based understanding of thought and action are redundant. This discussion will also suggest that neoliberalism establishes conditions in which the individual needs to engage with its structures in order to form their sense of self.

Fisher describes the concept of capitalist realism as being 'like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action' (2009, p. 16). This is essentially how neoliberalism operates as an ideology; it must constrain thought and action in such a way that they are focussed on market logics and economic criteria. Within Fisher's work on capitalist realism is

the idea of a 'business ontology', a notion that 'everything in society...should be run as a business' (2009, p. 17). The business ontology has been discussed throughout the thesis so far, especially in Chapter 1 and can be seen as the way neoliberalism and the process of neoliberalisation redefine social and ethical life in accordance with economic criteria. In the example given by Foucault, the mother-child relationship is the subject to this logic when thought of in terms of investment and return. Play is thought of in this logic also as players will be occupied with how best to utilise their game in order to obtain a desired output.

Fisher looks at the reality of climate change and environmental disaster in relation to capitalist realism. He states that environmental catastrophe only appears as a simulacrum because 'its real implications for capitalism are too traumatic to be assimilated into the system' (2009, p. 18). This ignorance or shunning of climate change is not accidental for Fisher, as he notes that capitalism has a need for 'a constantly expanding market', it has a 'growth fetish' so it is incompatible with any notion of sustainability (2009, pp. 18-19). The absence of non-rationalised play in neoliberalism functions under a similar concept here. The need for value and growth places a rationalising demand on the act of play because neoliberalism is incompatible with unproductive, irrational human thought and action.

The name of the concept itself containing 'realism' infers an aesthetic. Fisher himself discusses the movie *Children of Men* (2006) stating that it is specific to 'later capitalism' and that it captures the phrase 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism' (2009, pp. 2-3). What occurs in the film is the end of childbirth around the world for two decades; the United Kingdom descends into fascism with open-air cages for those being deemed illegal immigrants being directly viewable in the streets. A scene near the beginning of the film shows the protagonist buying a coffee from a café franchise that exists amid the viewable detention and brutalisation of refugees and the infertility of humanity. The protagonist purchases the coffee as a news story is audible informing viewers about the death of the last child to be born on Earth. What makes this specific to 'late capitalism' is that the act of consuming coffee from a café shop franchise can co-exist almost directly alongside

what is, in effect, the end of world. Lyotard's hyperbolic argument states that contemporary capitalism is driven towards overcoming the ultimate finitude of the heat death of the universe (1991); it does not matter that there are no humans but capitalism could live on. Even as the world or humanity is ending but capitalism is something that will be there; this is the basis of the realism in capitalist realism. This is also consistent with neoliberalism which is a form of capitalism that amplifies the presence of market and economic criteria in multiple areas of life. Foucault's example of the mother-child relationship becoming influenced by neoliberal imperatives in being judged according to economic criteria seems more pertinent in relation to *Children of Men*. In the event of global infertility, neoliberal ideology would initially judge the crisis as one of human capital rather than a deeper philosophical and ecological crisis.

As was noted in a previous section of this chapter, as the neoliberal hegemony was being established there appeared to be no alternatives to the market focussed way of understanding the world. Alternatives to neoliberal ways of being seemed to be failing and disappearing as neoliberalism influenced more political, social, and cultural areas. A sense of 'reflexive impotence' came to influence thought and behaviour in relation to the development of a neoliberal hegemony (Fisher, 2009, p. 21). This phenomenon occurs when individuals often recognise the flawed nature of the wider system (for example, the acknowledgement of the 2008 financial crisis and the austerity economics that followed) but feel there is nothing that can be done about such an extensive and entrenched system.

The disappearance of alternatives to neoliberalism is due to its presence in so many different areas of human activity. The weight of the presence of neoliberalism even makes it difficult to imagine other ways and contexts in which activity can take place. The elimination of imagination is significant when thinking about what play can be. The individual's opportunities to play in AAA video games will largely be rationalised (Chapter 5: Identity), seeing them aim for objectives, digital trophies, or level progression for the sake of progression (Chapter 6: Agency). If play is so influenced it prevents it from being beneficial to the player in ways that are not rational or

productive, as it would be dislocated from economic criteria. Davies notes how 'neoliberalism is the *pursuit of the disenchantment of politics by economics*' (2014, p. 4, emphasis added). In this sense, neoliberalism has been a modernising force in the Weberian sense of rationalisation (Davies, 2014, p. 8). There is an inclination towards who and what to value from the ruling neoliberal ideology and its drive to rationalise via economics. Dean makes a similar observation when looking at the work of Žižek, noting that everyday life can be seen as 'post-political' within the structure of neoliberal ideology and is reduced to something to be managed and the possibility of politics is 'foreclosed in advance' (Dean, 2008, p. 53). Play for example is an activity within neoliberalism that is rationalised to the point of removing non-economic elements and this is no accident.

Brown, like Dean, studies enjoyment using psychoanalysis and he also relates this work to the play of video games. To relate these processes of neoliberal ideology to the play of video games more specifically, it is instructive to return to the question of why video games are played. This has already been discussed at length in Chapter 2 and referred to above in this chapter, but there is further significance in the operation of neoliberal ideology that can be explored. Brown examines how certain forms of enjoyment, rather than being radical, can actually serve ideologies they seek to oppose (2015, p. 10). Brown uses 'enjoyment is the key to ideology' as one of the headings in his book and I broadly agree with this statement but differ in my approach as to how this operates and materialises. Brown's analysis of enjoyment is drawn from the psychoanalytical work of Žižek, stating that society not only tells us what to enjoy but also to '*enjoy per se*' (2015, p. 6, emphasis added). He also studies the Lacanian notion of *jouissance*, a form of enjoyment that goes beyond societally imposed limit. Via the work of Žižek, Brown observes that *jouissance* is a 'peculiar enjoyment which is central to the formation of the subject, but the subject does not grasp the ideology behind it' (2015, p. 56). It is then in this space beyond sanctioned enjoyment that the individual comes to confront and form their self. Brown argues that whilst not being outside of ideology, *jouissance* is a moment that shows us something 'that our ideology would like to hide' as it would prompt inward reflection

rather than go along with identity formation in line with the dominant ideology (2015, p. 70).

I argue that the imperative to enjoy within neoliberal ideology is not concerned with enjoyment in a sense of *fun* but is an extension of the fetishisation of work and productivity. An ideology that fetishizes work would see it as an enjoyable activity. Within neoliberal structures, the imperative to enjoy is the imperative to be productive, the totalisation of market forces consumes the ideology itself. It is not that enjoyment is to be denied but that the subject is having to learn to enjoy the correct things according to neoliberal ideology. Brown identifies this by observing that we are ‘in a kind of second wave of what 19th century Victorian discourse called “rational recreation”’ (2015, p. 66) and he is correct in elaborating that if he were completely convinced by his own argument then ‘enjoyment in our society has been rationalized and organized in such a way as to instil a sense of subjectivity that will suit a capitalist agenda’ (2015, pp. 70-71).

Despite this, Brown attempts to identify an excess of enjoyment that ‘is not determined and rationalized by our language and discourse despite its best attempts to rationalize and explain all of our pleasure’ (2015, p. 70). Brown’s justification for this is his own stated enjoyment of the *Football Manager* series of video games, yet from my own knowledge of these games they organise activity in highly rationalised and quantified ways. As Brown states we should look for ‘inconsistencies within it [our enjoyment] and be attentive to its power over us’ (2015, p. 71), so our enjoyment needs to again be applied to our play broadly. The business ontology that has been discussed that operates within neoliberal ideology does attempt to organise *everything* as a business, our enjoyment is no exception. In that it may not always be successful is not the point but the fact that it does attempt to do so contributes to neoliberal subjectivities and the cult of work. There has been a reorganisation and change of what enjoyment is within neoliberal structures and the subjectivity it fosters, not just a governance of already existing enjoyment. We need to be prepared to thoroughly interrogate perceived moments of *jouissance* and question whether it is our own enjoyment or the fostering of neoliberal subjectivities.

Play, becoming colonised by economic logics, loses some ability to offer different ways of being and thinking, fostering the sense of reflexive impotence Fisher highlights. In the sense of Fisher's capitalist realism and related concepts of the business ontology and reflexive impotence, neoliberalism is something that becomes ontologically ubiquitous. Institutions and activity are understood in economic terms, and the same applies to the self with Bauman's notion of liquidity able to detail how specifically neoliberal structures affect the self. He describes the process of neoliberalisation in similar ways to the other theorists mentioned above, stating:

...economic order, once entrenched, will have colonized, re-educated and converted to its ways the rest of social life; that order came to dominate the totality of human life because whatever else might have happened in that life has been rendered irrelevant and ineffective as far as the relentless and continuous reproduction of that order was concerned (2000, p. 4).

The order referred to here is that of the structure of society and its drive towards the domination of rationality in the economic sense. Whilst Bauman is not explicitly referring to neoliberalism the observation applies and is reminiscent of Fisher's work in the ways it highlights the ubiquitous nature of the ideology. Human thought and action are directed towards reinforcing the domination of the neoliberal ideology and other possibilities for thought and action are removed in advance.

As previously discussed, neoliberal ideology would organise all human action through economic criteria, and this includes an individual's identity. It is in this respect that Bauman's notion of liquidity is useful in revealing the way neoliberal ideology operates in relation to the self. Bauman observes how seeking an identity within neoliberal structures is a struggle, the search for identity is an 'ongoing struggle to arrest or slow down the flow, to solidify the fluid, to give form to the formless' (2000, p. 82). Bauman goes on to state that identities are volatile and unfixed in our society and we are, supposedly, given the ability to 'shop around' in the 'supermarket of identities' to make and unmake ourselves (2000, p. 83). Bauman's notion refers to a society in 'which life considers highly what is transitory rather than permanent, the

immediate rather than long term; and regards utility as prior to any other value' (Palese, 2013, p. 1). The liquid element of identity is that it can be easily made and unmade, it is not solid but the individual often desires their identity to be more solid, meaning it is more stable.

Palese, studying Bauman's work, observes the sort of demands made of the individual in a liquid world:

The world demands to the individual a constant and increasingly controversial search for identity and tracking of parameters for standardizing in order to obtain the "role" of individuals, because, today, the identity is a task. Being individuals in the liquid society does not simply mean being good consumers, but also being competitive goods in the global market (2013, p. 1).

The idea of being a commodity as a part of identity signals the way in which economic criteria inform the sense of self within neoliberal structures. The individuals are tasked with defining themselves; they must find who they are and what they are. Due to the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideology, this sense of self is often formed in terms of economic criteria. This is why Palese states that the individual is a commodity in a market themselves, in that the individual makes themselves a form of capital.

In previous eras (before the domination of neoliberal capitalism), it would have been more common for people to define themselves in relation to work. Bauman gives the example of 'heavy capitalism' or Fordism in which there was a 'world of law-givers, routine-designers and supervisors, the world of other-directed men and women pursuing fixed-by-others ends in a fixed-by-others fashion' (2000, p. 63). It was around this structure that people drew their identity. They were their job, which was often stable and consistent. This changed with the establishment of the neoliberal hegemony. Bauman notes how conditions have changed under 'light capitalism' (that can be identified as neoliberalism or post-Fordism), 'it is by courtesy of the chooser that a would-be authority becomes an authority. Authorities no longer command;

they ingratiate themselves with the chooser; they tempt and seduce' (Bauman, 2000, pp. 63-64). If work does not offer the 'secure axis around which to wrap and fix self-definitions, identities and life-projects' (Bauman, 2000, p. 139) the individual will seek them elsewhere. Capital (and the self is also as understood as a form of capital) is not fixed in the way it was under heavy capitalism. The liquidity of the system places more responsibility on the individual within the system to place themselves within it. Part of this, is to construct an identity and that identity must find its place in a neoliberal system. AAA video games can potentially offer the opportunity for self-definitions given the multitude of opportunities to be found in play, as was discussed in Chapter 2.

As was established in that chapter, the player is motivated to play in order to seek a meaningful experience. The rules, structure, and lists of objectives in AAA video games are appealing in the liquid world in which work and social life are defined by flexibility; the AAA video game can appear to be a cure to precariousness and uncertainty. The idea of the avatar providing temporal solid identity can be especially appealing. There is the opportunity for identification in the AAA video game space that can be liberating, even emancipatory (the case of *Bloodborne* helping someone to transition gender mentioned in Chapter 2 demonstrates this (Martinez, 2019)). The ubiquitous nature of neoliberalism extends to the digital space in AAA video games however, so the individual is still subject to the demands and directives of neoliberal ideology (this will be the subject of analysis in Chapter 5).

Human thought and action are captured for reinforcing neoliberalism. The individual becomes adjusted to the ends of neoliberalism, they think and act in accordance with economic criteria, and our communication is used to produce value and is thought of in terms of its supposed value. Hill sums up this sentiment by stating that 'our energies are diverted into the architecture of the systems that exploit us' (2015, p. 5). For example, people may find themselves thinking 'is this *worth* saying', 'is this person *worth* speaking to', or 'is this activity *worth* doing?' Dean observes that political engagement through communication technologies serves to reinforce neoliberalism's hold on technological infrastructure (2009, pp. 31-32). The individual

is seemingly trapped and their contribution towards the reinforcement of a neoliberal ideology is not necessarily deliberate but does occur due to the presence of the ideology within technologies they engage with.

Bringing the concepts in Fisher's and Bauman's work together, it can be observed that neoliberal structures motivate certain forms of behaviour in multiple areas of life. Fisher's notion of capitalist realism reflects the way in which neoliberal ideology is pervasive in everyday life. Within this environment, the business ontology and reflexive impotence are fostered, as individuals understand everyday life as a business and see alternative ways of being as redundant. Bauman's liquid modernity captures the way in which the individual's sense of self within neoliberalism is shifting and unstable. The individual must find a way to form their sense of self, potentially through what they consume. The significance of this in relation to what Fisher observes is that the individual forming their sense of self, as well as being necessitated by neoliberal structures, is a process influenced by a business ontology. The individual comes to understand themselves and their activity as a business, assessing their activity according to economic criteria. These conditions can be surmised in what is known as the cult of work and a form of subjectivity known as the entrepreneurial self.

The Cult of Work and the Entrepreneurial Self

An obvious clash between the neoliberal ideology and play is in the neoliberalism's fetishisation of work. This fetishisation of work can be seen in things like the normalisation or glorification of overwork or working under extreme pressure. Examples of this can be seen in how Lyft, a ride-sharing app in which drivers are employed as freelancers, gave an award called a "golden fistbump" to a pregnant driver. The pregnant driver accepted a fare despite going into labour as they did so, revealing a startling prioritisation of work over wellbeing and becoming a parent. This toxic attitude that is manifested within neoliberal structures is also shown in how freelance marketplace Fiverr glorify people overworking (they call them "doers"), stating that they are eating coffee for their lunch and opting for "sleep deprivation" as a drug of choice (Menegus, 2016) (Tolentino, 2017). It is easy to imagine something

like “working no matter the hurdles” added to this to include workers who feel as though they have to work no matter the scenario. What is childbirth when there is money to be made? These work/life balances can be internalised as normal or even preferable as they can come to define an individual and make one feel as though they are “winning” at what they are doing. As previously discussed, the task of identification is on the individual in neoliberalism and a sense of immense productivity can help that person affirm that they are useful as they are useful in economic sense. If the person can act as a valuable economic asset in a society that demands value, they can themselves feel valuable.

The global market economy based on competition and individualism that neoliberal politicians and economists set out to create has led to the growth of a class of people called the ‘Precariat’ (Standing, 2011, p. 43). The precariat is a workforce defined by the core characteristics of neoliberalism, they are fluid and must live their life according to economic criteria. It is noted that labour market deregulation associated with the establishment of neoliberal economics aimed to ‘remove all external constraints on the freedom of employers’ (Bessant, 2018, p. 791), in doing so placing the economic risks of the market onto the workers themselves. It is up to the worker to utilise their time as best they could as employers and political figures demand that workers value their work above all else and valorise those who work harder than all others (Coote, 2016), much like those rewarded the “golden fistbump” or the “doers” that sacrifice their health in the name of productivity. Srnicek and Williams describe typical circumstances in neoliberal society:

We continue to work long hours, commuting further, to perform tasks that feel increasingly meaningless. Our jobs have become more insecure, our pay has stagnated, and our debt has become overwhelming. We struggle to make ends meet, to put food on the table, to pay the rent or mortgage, and we shuffle from job to job, we reminisce about pensions and struggle to find affordable childcare. Automation renders us unemployed and stagnant wages devastate the middle classes, while corporate profits surge to new heights. The

glimmers of a better future are trampled and forgotten under the pressures of an increasingly precarious and demanding world. And each day, we return to work as normal; exhausted, anxious, stressed and frustrated (2015, p. 2).

Despite its potential for overstatement, Srnicek and Williams highlight the most drastic consequences of the neoliberalisation of work and society. Furthermore, in relation to the neoliberalisation of universities, Loveday states that 'the prevalence of anxiety is characteristic of increasingly individualised and responsabilised academic work' (2018, p. 163). Not only this but that anxiety is also a tactic of this formation of work as it prompts further productivity. The anxiety experienced by many is not just an unfortunate side effect of neoliberal structures, but the manifestation of the drive to keep working. It is a natural consequence of the neoliberal socio-economic formation. The furthering of the cult of work takes place within the socio-economic context of the liquid reality experienced by many in contemporary society. Pressures like insecure employment, spiralling debt, high rent, utilities, and food prices are coupled with crises of selfhood that are experienced by the individual in liquid modernity. As highlighted by Olivier, it is hard to deny that 'modes of suffering and hardship in contemporary society' are inseparable from the 'hegemonic neoliberal economic system' (2015, p. 19). The questions of who we are and what we are here to do are answered by the fetishisation of work, pushing us towards anxiety and stress.

The forms of work many people engage with has also altered, as neoliberalism has become the dominant ideology within society. Work itself is often immaterial or cognitive. Berardi sees that 'high tech workers tend to consider labour as the most essential part in their lives, the most specific and personalized' (Berardi, 2009, p. 76). An issue that can develop with engaging in this immaterial labour is that it can become harder to differentiate between what is and is not work, especially when it is such an essential part of your life. Hill, in his work on cognitive labour, highlights how the 'immaterialisation of work means the foreman has disappeared, internalised by the worker; it also makes the contours and parameters of work and the company

impermanent and less certain' (2015, p. 25). Hill notes how we struggle to 'maintain a distinction between work time and leisure time, since there is always the potential for the latter to be colonised by the former' (2015, p. 25). Work makes its presence known everywhere; the labour that is sold is the basic functions of everyday life.

The nature of the work and this immaterial labour encourages certain patterns of thought and behaviour. Hill notes that we are 'being constrained into adjusting to the hyper-interactive, over-stimulated, dangerously competitive and ultimately precarious environment' with it resulting in 'psychopathology' (2015, pp. 36-37). The value of this labour is abstract, with Berardi highlighting it is 'mental time serving only for the production of exchange value' (2009, p. 58). This calls to mind the achievements and trophies mentioned earlier that players aim for as they work their way through many AAA video games. Berardi states that 'capital needs mental energies, psychic energies' (2009, p. 42), and, as Hill notes, this summarises the mental health crisis being experienced that is linked to our socioeconomic circumstances (2015, p. 37). After describing the needs of capital Berardi observes how the functioning of capital is 'fucking up' the individual (2009, p. 42). The mental health crisis refers to the increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression that manifest due to societal causes. Davies discussed how the emotions of individual's are being manipulated by big business in a way that links consumption to happiness whilst psychological profiling of individuals leads to increased diagnoses of stress and anxiety (2015). This anxiety is a natural consequence of working more and feeling as though you should be working at every given opportunity. It is a manifestation of the fetishisation of entrepreneurialism. The cult of work is something that is actively damaging to those that are caught up in it. It is hard to step outside of it and play; something that can often be a way out of it, too is corrupted.

Foucault's work looks at the notion of what can be termed the "entrepreneurial self". Foucault details this form of self by stating that 'homo economicus is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself...being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings' (2008, p. 226). Vallas and Christin summarise this self as a 'form of subjectivity that aligns with

market needs' and is fostered by neoliberal doctrines (Vallas & Christin, 2018, p. 5). It is this self that is how the individual is *supposed* to operate within neoliberal structures. Foucault also uses the phrase *homo economicus*, this designation for the self aligns closely with the entrepreneurial self but the entrepreneurial self is more apt a phrase for this current neoliberal formation of society.

Fleming notes capitalism produces a large amount of 'crap', this crap being pollution, stress, in work poverty, waste, insecurity etc. (2017, p. 6). Fleming notes the significance of this 'crap,' looking at how it is affecting individuals' lives within neoliberal capitalism and notes this:

Homo economicus was meant to be an effective relay mechanism, shifting capitalism's excrement to the next least powerful in the sequence. This is what *rationality* and *efficiency* really means in the context of free market capitalism. But now the shit's starting to stick, an outcome of both the rising disrepair (debt, etc.) and years of governmental policy that has sought to propagate 'economic man' throughout the entire social body. In short, homo economicus finds him or herself at the end of the shit chain and is now practically drowning in the stuff (2017, p. 6).

Part of the 'crap' that Fleming identifies is the insecurity produced by the conditions of neoliberalism that aggravates stress and puts multiple responsibilities on the individual. The individual can wade through this 'crap' by being productive and efficient in their everyday life but reality for many begs to differ. For example, terms such as 'anxiety epidemic' are used to describe the current state of social relations and, as of 2018, the collective student debt of individuals in the US was \$1.4tn (Hutton, 2016) (Miller, 2018). These are example of 'crap'. The individual within neoliberal structures is anxious because of instability and, potentially, mountains of debt related to a seemingly necessary education.

Fleming also refers to the individual as *homo economicus*, the supposedly rational subject under the socio-economic system that will seek to maximise their utility as a

consumer and producer. It is through this rational and efficient behaviour that the individual can supposedly rise above the 'crap', meaning things like anxiety and debt. As stated, it is increasingly difficult to rise above the 'crap' via rational means. The precarity and instability fostered by neoliberal structures just serves to amplify instability for the individual. Fleming's notion of neoliberalism producing 'crap' is reminiscent of the 'bullshit' work that neoliberalism fosters that Graeber highlighted (2019, p. 99). Play, in its ideal form, is something that can potentially be free and separate from an oppressive everyday reality, allowing the player to exercise meaningful agency and operate in a different way to the entrepreneurial demands of neoliberal structures. However, conditions and relations of the neoliberal socio-economic system are replicated within AAA video game environments.

Lazzarato states that:

Neoliberal government intervenes in the domain of the social by converting the latter into a function of the enterprise. It intervenes to promote multiplicity, differentiation and competition of enterprises and to incite and constrain each individual to become an entrepreneur of him/herself, to become 'human capital' (2009, p. 120).

This is precisely how player agency is motivated within the AAA video game as play is unbound from leisure. As will be established in the cognitive mapping exercises in later chapters, the player thinks of their play in terms of levels, objectives, and other such aims and signifiers of ability and progress. The player must play in an enterprising way, that is why they are playing, and they are playing towards the goal of becoming a better unit of human capital through their link to the avatar. The player is motivated to behave in this way as it falls in line with the other ways in which neoliberalism influences social life. The construction of the indebted subject, (someone that is 'morally invested in the promise to repay debt and the guilt this requires') is central to the constraining of an individual's agency within neoliberal structures (Lazzarato, 2012) (Charbonneau & Paulsen Hansen, 2014, p. 1040). The guilt of the subject ensures they behave, or play, responsibly as they feel as though they are indebted and any activity should be used productively, free and

unproductive activity would simply serve to make them feel guilty about wasting time. This motivates play to be done *properly*, according to rules and directive and whatever leads to signifiers of progress.

Prior to entering the digital space provided by the video game, an individual's agency is influenced and constrained in different ways by neoliberal ideology. Foucault stated that 'one cannot take care of oneself without knowing oneself' (2010, p. 44) but neoliberalism's demands of the individual makes it harder for us to know ourselves, as the burden of forming an identity falls on the individual. Foucault draws historical connections between rituals and practices, such as the Christian ritual of confession and the practice of therapy, to show linkages among forms of human subjectivity (1993). Considering these two points, we can see how different rituals and practices can be used to get to know oneself, or at least attempt to define oneself. The Christian at confession would say "I have sinned" and so see themselves as a sinner and, according to Foucault, the subject in therapy can declare "I am mad", in both cases the individual declares 'aloud and intelligibly the truth about oneself' (1993, p. 201). Whilst individuals in therapy may not be declaring that they are mad, they are declaring potential truths. These truths being components of the self, allowing the individual to formulate who they are. With neoliberalism being the dominant ideology within society and the previously discussed issue of the individual having the task of defining themselves, the individual has to find a ritual or practice in which to declare, "I am [something]". As a result, individual notions of the self often form based on relations to productivity and the performance of work.

This form of selfhood is encapsulated in the *workings* of the gig economy, in which people are encouraged to work as "entrepreneurs". This mindset is demonstrated by the rhetoric of business leaders. Scholz highlights this sort of rhetoric noting phrases like 'just check in with your "inner entrepreneur" and "do what you love!" Reid Hoffman, cofounder of LinkedIn, begins his book *The Start-Up of You* by channelling Ryan Bingham: "All humans are entrepreneurs.'" (2017, p. 22). This idea that we are all entrepreneurs and that there is an entrepreneur in all of us is also reflected in the rhetoric of companies like Fiverr, a digital marketplace for freelance workers.

Woodcock and Graham's work on the gig economy highlight that the significant risks of work are passed from employer to employee in its functioning (2020), which effectively generates insecurity and instability in the lives of those engaged in this manner of working. It has also been highlighted that this form of work threatens to undermine older ideas of relations to work, fragmentation of work and casualisation in more standard areas of employment (Wood, et al., 2019, p. 57). I argue these trends can also be recognised outside of work settings, as other areas of life become increasingly fragmented and neoliberalised in their functioning. Individuals are all the more conscious of their productivity outside of the work setting, through self-tracking, calorie counting, and wondering what their play is doing for them, areas of life are becoming isolated forms of activity that contribute to the betterment of themselves as a form of capital.

Figure 2: Fiverr advert designed to recruit people to advertise their service on the Fiverr domain

Figure 2 is one of many similar adverts ran by Fiverr that champions overwork and the idea of being a "doer". Other Fiverr adverts make claims like "everyone is an entrepreneur", "every day is a challenge", and "every day is "what can you do better?" (Fiverr, 2017). This is the idealised thought pattern for the individual according to neoliberal imperatives, *everything* (including the self) should be thought of in terms of market logic and economic criteria. This reflects the way in which entrepreneurial subjectivities are changing activity, especially work. The domain of labour need not end outside of conventional work hours, Dolly Parton's 9 to 5 is a distant memory. This reference to Dolly Parton's song *9 To 5* (1980) may seem like a throwaway comment yet it signals the way in which ideas of work and activity have changed. Released in 1980 (prior to the establishment of neoliberal hegemony in wider society and culture) the song highlights the drudgery of the, at the time, typical 9 to 5 work pattern in the United States and how bosses exploit your labour without credit. At the time of writing this thesis, the top comment on the official music video for the song on YouTube is '9- 5 is a dream shift nowadays' (Parton, 2014).

Figure 3: The top comment on the Dolly Parton - 9 To 5 (Official Video)

This comment highlights that the stability (even if it was miserable) is absent in the place of more *entrepreneurial* employment practices. The entrepreneurial subject should be ready to carry out labour as and when the opportunity presents itself. This is the essence of the gig economy, work is everywhere waiting to be carried out. Many workers in this economy will work for companies like Uber or Deliveroo, in which working hours are flexible and outcomes are variable. Research has highlighted a series of issues with this form of work, notably that there is 'a lack of financial security, a loss of dignity at work, and the inability to progress in a career or train to leave it' (Hern, 2020). Workers become trapped in precarity, the only way to function is to continue to be entrepreneurial and work as they are able to. I would argue that being offered a 9 to 5 in this scenario would feel like a welcome change and usher in stability and security. I believe it is also significant to highlight how, as I read it, Dolly Parton's *9 To 5* contains anti-capitalist undertones yet today this song can be read as a set of better working conditions that offered a sense of stability many do not know. This indicates just how significant the establishment of neoliberal hegemony has been in our understanding of everyday life, the anti-capitalism of 1980 reads as a utopian alternative to the gig economy.

This description of a 9 to 5 job as a 'dream shift' signals the collapse of the labour and leisure domains that has occurred within neoliberal structures. The idea of a 9 to 5 clearly signals that you will be in work between 9am and 5pm (usually from Monday to Friday) and the time outside of these work hours is for the individual to spend as they wish (their leisure time). There was a clear separation between when work should be occurring to when it should not be occurring. For many, this distinction no longer exists. This is not always due to not working a 9 to 5 as technology has also played a part in collapsing the labour and leisure domains. This was discussed in this Chapter in how Hill noted how labour time can so easily colonise leisure time (2015, p. 25). Smart phones, for example, allow workers to read correspondence from

employers, potential employers, or potential work opportunities whilst outside of their established work hours (if they have them).

For many, work within neoliberal structures can be simultaneously pervasive and precarious. The gaming industry itself is well documented as fostering conditions of overwork (often known as crunch) whilst also having numerous professions within the industry defined by precarity (Bulut, 2015, p. 195) (Woodcock, 2019). This precariousness and intensification of work is framed as a spirit of entrepreneurialism, making a virtue of overwork and the seeking of further work. Lilley and Lightfoot note how the concept of entrepreneurship 'is able to carry through economic thought to deliver a transformation that is both expansive and sociological', observing that the economic has transformed our social lives (2014, p. 86).

This collapse of labour and leisure domains has allowed for the understanding of leisure activities in economic terms. This has especially affected play, an activity which should serve as a natural barrier to the rationalisations of everyday life. Play ideally needs to take place in a separate space yet the collapse of distinct labour and leisure domains have made play vulnerable to a process of neoliberalisation.

The Neoliberalisation of Play

As mentioned in the previous chapters, Caillois details the six formal qualities of play as being '(1) free, (2) separate, (3) uncertain, (4) unproductive, (5) regulative, and (6) fictive' with the last two tending to exclude one another (2001, p. 43). Caillois warns of contamination of play from ordinary life with it 'corrupting and destroying its very nature' (2001, p. 43). For Caillois, the nature of daily life at the time of his writings resulted in the changing of the nature and conditions of play:

The rule of instinct again becoming absolute, the tendency to interfere with the isolated, sheltered, and neutralized kind of play spreads to daily life and tends to subordinate it to its own needs, as much as possible. What used to be a pleasure becomes an obsession. What was

an escape becomes an obligation, and what was a pastime is now a passion, compulsion, and source of anxiety (2001, p. 44).

It is from this that the principle of play becomes 'corrupted' (Caillois, 2001, p. 45). This section will explore this corruption of play in the context of the current neoliberal hegemony.

Caillois expands upon Huizinga's definition of play discussed in Chapter 1 ('free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly' (Huizinga, 1949, p. 13)) and produces definitions for different kinds of play, these are *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*. Games can also combine elements of these classifications of play; the game of poker for example has characteristics of both *agon* and *alea* (Caillois, 2001, p. 18). Caillois notes that 'for professional boxers, bicycle riders, or actors, *agon* or *mimicry* has ceased being a recreation intended as a relaxation from fatigue or a relief from the monotony of oppressive and exhausting work. It is their very work' (2001, p. 45). Whilst the player of AAA video games (unless playing an esports version) will likely not rely on the game for their livelihood, the play is still affected by the rationalising process of neoliberal ideology. The attributes of *agon* and *mimicry* in the video game, competition, and roleplaying, are centred on economic logics rather than playful ones. Playful logics would not necessarily exclude competition and roleplaying. For example, games with friends on video games like the *FIFA* series are a clear example of playful logics dictating interaction between friends. It is the rationalising influence of neoliberal ideology will cause these ways of playing to foster entrepreneurial subjectivities. Despite writing before the establishment of neoliberal hegemony, Caillois' warnings of the state of human thought and action are especially relevant to the individual within neoliberal structures. He states that 'upon waking up in the morning, everyone is supposed to find himself winning or losing in a gigantic, ceaseless, gratuitous, and inevitable lottery which will determine his general coefficient of success or failure for the next twenty-four hours' (Caillois, 2001, p. 47). With neoliberal structures, the individual is motivated to make themselves a winner in a 'ceaseless' manner as Caillois puts it. Respite from this does not often carry to

the digital space of AAA video games as neoliberal ideology ramifies the technology. Caillois notes that 'competition is a law of modern life' (2001, p. 50) and this applies more so given the emphasis of market forces and individual responsibility within neoliberalism. Caillois notes this about games, 'for the time that they afford formal and limited satisfaction, they educate, enrich, and immunize the mind against their virulence. At the same time, they are made fit to contribute usefully to the enrichment and the establishment of various patterns of culture' (Caillois, 2001, p. 55). The flow of everyday life within neoliberal structures is that of judging thought and action according to economic criteria, assessing what actions can be valuable and rational and this expands into all areas of the everyday, including play. Therefore, the 'patterns of culture' that games will help to establish are that of neoliberalism. AAA video games will just serve to educate towards the economic logics that reinforce neoliberal hegemony.

Brock highlights Caillois' idea that 'the social, political, and economic organization of modern life has a tendency to *rationalize* these formal qualities of play through the games that we interact with' (2017, p. 322). Brock brings this concept forward to modern video games by looking at esports.³⁶ He highlights that play within the professionalised esports context is 'no longer an escape from work' and that play here takes on a 'commodified form' (Brock, 2017, p. 335) in the way that Caillois warns that for professionals of certain games their play becomes 'their very work' (Caillois, 2001, p. 45). Brock extends Caillois' warning to state that 'demands of modern games culture are perverting play by turning human psychology toward instrumental rationality' (2017, p. 323). Brock also establishes that professionalised context of competitive gaming is well understood as a form of precarious work (2017, p. 332), stating that these 'precarious socioeconomic conditions structure the development of an elite gamer "mind-set"' (2017, p. 333). The precariousness of being a player of games in this context constrains player thought and action in the

³⁶ Competitive gaming or gaming in a professionalised context were players compete for money and prizes.

way that neoliberal ideology intends. Play is undertaken with economic logics dictating how the player behaves and the demands on this play are ceaseless.

Brock also looks at how match fixing has been rationalised in esports (2017, p. 334), building upon work which draws parallels between the mind-set fostered within esports and the working rules of neoliberal capitalism (Wark, 2007) (Kirkpatrick, 2013). He studies the story of Cheon “Promise” Min-Ki, a South Korean professional *League of Legends* (2009) player, who faced accusations of match-fixing (2017, p. 334). Brock notes that:

Min-Ki was introduced to the world of competitive video gaming out of necessity. “I literally devoted myself to training to become a professional player, as I’m poor,” Min-Ki tells the reporter, and “The only meal I had was a pot noodle and two cans of coffee per day. Sometimes when I was training my fans asked me whether I was hungry and they would order me a delivery” (2017, p. 334).

Play for Min-Ki was his livelihood, it became his very work as Caillois observed of other professionals that play various categories of games. Mounting financial pressures on Min-Ki and his team are what led to him colluding (with his manager and a gambling website) to fix competitive matches. These pressures, accusations of match fixing, and fears of unemployment led to a suicide attempt by Min-Ki. For Min-Ki, playing games was “life or death” (Brock, 2017, p. 334). Brock states that this case shows:

Negative effects of blurring work and play together, as with financial competition comes the rationalization of match fixing as a viable choice in times of financial hardship and precarious employment. Min-Ki decided to act out of economic necessity, and the team’s potential bankruptcy provided the conditions of possibility—the urgency—for an autonomously reflexive decision (Brock, 2017, pp. 334-335).

Brock also highlights that Min-Ki's manager had urged him not to tell of the events, 'leveraging his professional career (and social mobility)' against the potential outcomes (2017, p. 335). This is an example of the corruption of play, in a financial and moral sense. The reflection of the demands of neoliberalism in play lead to the cruel conditions that rationalise these forms of actions and lead to horrible consequences.

Brock's warning, mentioned earlier, about play no longer being an escape from work is evident within this professionalised context, and gaming in this way shapes 'cognition toward more instrumental ways of being' (2017, p. 335). This study is concerned with AAA video games being played in a (ideally) private space rather than a professionalised environment. Caillois and Brock's warning about the corruption of play still extend into AAA video games. The process of neoliberalisation occurs within AAA video games, which means that economic logics and ontologies are present within them.

Brock also highlights the issues of alienation for the players of games. He speaks of alienation in the way that Caillois does, stating it is 'the point at which the player can no longer recognize himself or herself in the actions that the professionalized context has taken them toward' (Brock, 2017, p. 335). The context of playing AAA video games in private may not be professionalised but it is still subject to the rationalising motives and economic demands that want the player to be playing well or efficiently. For example, compilations of people becoming enraged when losing or struggling whilst playing AAA video games are common. It has been noted that it is losing more so than anything else that triggers aggression (Przybylski, et al., 2014), highlighting the way in which the player thinks about their playing experience in terms of competition and the significance of the outcome. If the player approaches their game in the way that they should be playing well or efficiently then this will block forms of play that can be unproductive or uncertain, what it should ideally be.

Berardi notes that from the decades that began with Reagan and Thatcher 'there is the unquestionable domination of economic priorities' and that the 'fanatic application of market rules' has produced misery (2009, p. 58). Whilst this misery will

not be universal, it highlights the potential for alienation as a result of market forces and economic inequalities. Playing a video game influenced by neoliberal ideology, whether AAA or in an esports context, can produce a sense of alienation, or even rage, in the player. This is deliberate and serves to reinforce neoliberal ideology within everyday life. This element of neoliberalism is captured by Brown where she states 'neoliberalism is the rationality through which capitalism finally swallows humanity' (Brown, 2015, p. 44). The formal qualities of play (that it is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, and regulative or fictive) will tend to clash with neoliberal ideology. The very nature of play changes when this happens. As Brock states, play has become 'precarious' as it edges closer to something else in its nature (2017, p. 335).

The agency that players exercise in the AAA video game is what allows them to form a sense of who they are, to the extent that play becomes the practice through which they can declare who they are. The player's agency has to have a means of being exercised within the digital environment of the AAA video game and more often than not, this is done through an avatar. Cohen notes that generally observers of a media text adopt the position of a character and experience the mediated environment through them (2001). Video games are often separated from other media texts due to their interactivity, with it being noted that 'players do not perceive the game (main) character as a social entity distinct from themselves, but experience a merging of their own self and the game protagonist' (Klimmt, et al., 2009, p. 354). A part of the player can in some way be considered to be merged with their avatar as they control their actions, it is this control that affords them agency within a video game's environment.

Brock and Fraser ask if gaming is 'good work', stating that playing a video game can provide a 'similar experience of skill' that Sennett's work (2008) identifies in relation to use of the hand in craft labour (Brock & Fraser, 2018, p. 1230). They link computer gaming to craft labour to address the claim that computer games are just 'meaningless distractions' by studying the labour practices that go into playing games

well (2018, p. 1220). Crawford claims that video games are just a distraction, as they require a minimum amount of input from the player, stating that:

You are neither learning something about the world, as the blind man does with his cane, nor acquiring something that could properly be called a skill. Rather, you are acting within the perception-action circuits encoded in the narrow affordances of the game, learned in a few trials (Crawford, 2015, pp. 90-91).

Brock and Fraser challenge this logic by recognising that 'players have to establish technical skill to negotiate the increasingly demanding, complex puzzles that contemporary computer games offer' (2018, p. 1221). Brock and Fraser explore whether video games are a craft by looking at the way a player engages with a game and skills they have to acquire by looking at the game *Dota 2* (2013). The player engages with the game through the controls they must learn to play according to design intentionality. The player apprehends the rules and best ways of playing by managing how they control the game, they also need to learn the purposes of signs and objects in the game, and they need to reflect upon these signs and objects when they encounter them (Brock & Fraser, 2018, pp. 1223-1227). This is the 'good work' that the playing of games can be seen as, because practice and the acquisition of skills are elements that the player can enjoy. There is a clear deployment of craft and skill in the playing of a video game that can quite easily be seen as a form of labour, especially when it is looked at in the professionalised context of esports. Despite the ways in which craft within play can be rationalised it should be noted that meaningful experiences are obtained in this way. As was discussed in Chapter 2, mastery of a video game's controllers can provide a player with a sense of accomplishment. It is competition and rationalisation that corrupts the experience of rewarding play. The horrific circumstances that can come about from competitiveness and external pressure in esports (such as those detailed above in this section) corrupt the craft component. Play becomes a tool towards means other than a meaningful experience.

What we can discern from Brock and Fraser's work is that play does share qualities with work but that does not imply it is work rather than play. Common ground

between work and play is expected. The experience of skill in the game can also turn corrosive outside of the professionalised context of esports, with players of AAA video games potentially having their experience directed and constrained in ways that removes meaningful experience of skill. In this context, play becomes something that is not purely leisure, taking on more work-like characteristics (bad neoliberal work), rather than good work through which the player can have meaningful experiences. This distinction between bad and good work relates to the experience of the action. The experience of skill means something else other than a rewarding feeling. We need to look at what the output of the play is as it is influenced by the economic logics and neoliberalism. Brock and Fraser state that 'the enjoyment of the games depends on the complexity of obscure challenges' (2018, p. 1222). In the name of value and productivity, the challenges within AAA video games will direct the player towards the reinforcement of the neoliberal ideology. Play becomes something to be undertaken and assessed according to economic criteria. I argue that this corrosion also extends to private contexts of play due to the nature of neoliberal structures that have been discussed in this chapter.

The corruption of play in private space is due to what occurs to play within neoliberalism, it becomes unbound from leisure, allowing it to be understood as something other than leisure and play. This is what allows for such occurrences like the fixing scandal in esports that Brock highlights and the 'toxic communications that corrode online interactions in the *Dota 2* community' that Brock and Fraser highlight (2018, p. 1231). To build on the notion of corrosion, it helps to think of what tied play to leisure before potentially being corroded away by external influence. What ties it to leisure are its formal characteristics (that it should be a free activity, separate from everyday life, uncertain in its outcome, and unproductive). Play becoming unbound from these characteristics means it can be understood in economic terms and practised within neoliberal structures where labour and leisure domains are not distinct. In this context, play can be undertaken in multiple ways and towards multiple ends, as long as it has economic justification. In this way play can be an endless activity, leading to a concept that can I term 'endless play'. Endless play refers to play that can be justified economically and hence never be finished as long as there

is further economic justification. This concept is significant in relation to the corruption of play as it means that play will tend not to be undertaken in ideal conditions. This concept will be further contextualised in relation to the analysis in Chapter 5, Chapter 6, and Chapter 7.

Why Oppose Neoliberalism

The purpose of this work is to highlight the corruption of play in AAA video games that is caused by neoliberal ideology. 'Corruption' is deliberately selected as the word to describe the effects neoliberal ideology has on play. There are multiple forms of corruption, relating to topics like finance and morality, but the form of corruption that is referred to in relation to play is a corroding one. Play is corrupted by neoliberal ideology in a way that fundamentally alters what it is, how it operates, and what it can do. Neoliberal ideology is corrupting in and of itself, wounding the individual's sense of self affecting how we understand ourselves, others, and the world around us. This corruption can be reflected in play by studying player identity (Chapter 5), player agency (Chapter 6), and consumption of AAA video games (Chapter 7).

The corruption of play is something deliberate. In the Introduction I included a short quote by Fisher that links neoliberalism to the cult of work. It is worth quoting this passage in greater length, Fisher observes that:

[Neoliberalism] remains tireless in its propagation of resentment against those few fugitives who can still escape the treadmill of debt and endless work, promising to ensure that soon, they too will be condemned to performing interminable, meaningless labour – as if the solution to the current stagnation lay in more work, rather than an escape from the cult of work. If there is to be any kind of future, it will depend on our winning back the uses of time that neoliberalism has sought to close off and make us forget (2018, p. 519).

Play has the potential to disrupt the cult of work and allow for truly free and unproductive leisure, which makes it dangerous to the economic sphere. This danger

is in a philosophical or political sense as the success of the video game industry shows that play is something lucrative in economic terms. Unproductive play is one of the uses of our time appears closed off by colonisation of the technologies that allow for play and the neoliberal logics that stem from them. AAA video games further the cult of work with the forms of play they offer the player. Play in AAA video games does not hold its functional potential of being escapist or separate from other areas of life due to neoliberal ideology reinforcing itself within the play-space.

As noted by Fisher, 'work and life become inseparable. Capital follows you when you dream' (2009, p. 34) so why would it not follow when you play? The 'life' part of this statement encompasses all human thought and action, work is so total that it contaminates everything. An individual's life becomes defined by whatever work they can do and this becomes an issue when everything starts to resemble work. Our play can ideally be dream-like in the way it can be free and separate from our everyday lived reality but the cult of work is so internalised that work is on the player's mind as well as within their play-space. This can be related to Crary's work on sleep, who noted that sleep is an 'uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism' (2014, p. 10). Crary demonstrated how there has been a deterioration of sleep within neoliberalism, due to it being a barrier to productive activity. One reviewer of the work stated how it lead them to 'marvel anew at the ways in which neoliberalism manages to be an affront to everything that is decent in humanity' (Lezard, 2014). Fisher stated that capital follows when we dream but it is more likely that capital would rather deny us dreams. Both can be true; sleep can be denied as it is a barrier to productive activity but when we do sleep our lives could be so consumed by work that we go on to dream about it. I argue the same observation can be made of play. Play can be denied as it should be an unproductive activity, like sleep, but when we do play neoliberal ideology is so pervasive it follows into the play-space or is a part of the structure of the play-space.

The notion of neoliberalism being an affront to humanity is noted by others. Graeber for example observes that most work within neoliberal structures is 'bullshit', stating that the nature of many jobs are 'direct assault on everything that makes us human'

(2019, p. 99). What separates this work from previous work relates to the issues discussed by Bauman; in Fordist socio-economic systems many would find meaning in employment but now under post-Fordism the nature of work is largely meaningless, or rather 'bullshit' according Graeber. There is a sense that neoliberal structures manage to intensify unsatisfying work whilst fostering anxiety and unstable conditions on a mass scale. As a system for organising life, it is one that is capable of producing misery due to the prioritisation of economic logics and I argue that creates a moral imperative to oppose it.

Berardi noted in 2009 that the apparent collapse of the current neoliberal order is occurring due to the 'flawed assumption that the soul can be reduced to mere rationality' (2009, p. 207). I agree in principle with this assumption and given the date it was likely made near to the seeming system ending financial crash of 2008, but, as has been highlighted in this chapter, actually existing neoliberalism is very resilient to crises and change. Neoliberal ideology as one of free market advocacy is collapsing but the specific neoliberalism that this work focusses upon (detailed through the work of Fisher and Bauman) is very much active. In this respect, neoliberal ideology and influence needs to be identified with conceptual tools and ways of resisting it constructed.

As an additional observation, Peck and Tickell note that 'nowhere does neoliberalism exist in its pure form' (2007, p. 31). Neoliberalism, especially in non-economic areas, will have to contend with impulses and actions that are counter to its logics and this will still be a part of play. Not all play in, and all components of, AAA video games are going to be neoliberal and there could even be AAA video games that attempt to (at least in part) reject neoliberal ideology. Play could still be utilised towards opposing neoliberal ends but due to limitations upon this thesis, this research could be conducted in the future in further depth.

Conclusions

This Chapter established how neoliberalism is understood in relation to this study and why neoliberalism should be opposed. Neoliberalism is understood as a

hegemonic ideology that shapes everyday life by fostering entrepreneurial subjectivities and repurposing technology towards the reproduction of neoliberal ideology. The chapter began by charting the historic development of neoliberalism through its development by the Mont Pelerin Society and eventual enacting in social, economic, and political policy around the world. A special note was made of the Chicago School of economics and the role of Milton Friedman in developing neoliberalism as a body of ideas which went onto establish an ideology hegemony. The neoliberal hegemony was entrenched through the 1990s and 2000s, and its reliance was shown in the way actually existing neoliberalism has maintained hegemony despite the 2008 financial crisis undermining belief in market ideologies.

The chapter went on to note that there are multiple forms of neoliberalism and it being important for any study of neoliberalism to be specific or the use of the term risks becoming an empty signifier. The specific form of neoliberalism that is relevant to this study can be identified as drive towards the organisation of all activity around economic criteria. A more specific understanding of this neoliberalism was arrived at by using the work of Fisher (2009) and Bauman (2000) to analyse neoliberal ideology. It was established that neoliberal structures are pervasive, constraining and influencing all thought and action by fostering a business ontology and enabling a liquid society defined by instability.

It was then established how this form of neoliberalism enables a cult of work and allows for a form of subjectivity known as the entrepreneurial self. The cult of work amounts to the intensification of work in areas outside of labour domains, demonstrating the collapse of labour and leisure domains within neoliberal society. The entrepreneurial self is a form of selfhood defined by the individual treating all their activity, as well as themselves, as a form of capital. The entrepreneurial self seeks to maximise what they are and the returns they can gain from their thought and action.

The next section of the chapter detailed the neoliberalisation of play. This process occurs due to the cult of work and entrepreneurial subjectivities enabled in neoliberal structures. Play is unbound from leisure by the intensification of work and

entrepreneurial subjectivities allow play to be understood in economic terms. The work of Brock (2017) was used to provide an example of neoliberalisation of play in an esports context before it was established how the process of neoliberalisation of play also occurs in private setting.

The chapter concluded by outlining why it is important to oppose neoliberalism and the neoliberalisation of multiple areas of life, especially play. It was observed that the organisation of all life around economic criteria is one that ultimately produces misery for many people, meaning there is a moral imperative to oppose it. Play could be used to oppose neoliberal ideology as its ideal conditions reject notions of rationality and productivity in favour of uncertainty and unproductiveness. The attempted discouragement of this form of activity signals the removal of a barrier to work that is essential for maintaining areas of life where one does not have to work and rationally justify actions.

Chapter 4: Methodology

The purpose of this chapter is to detail the methodology that will be used to reveal the corruption of play through the analysis of different aspects of AAA video games. The method of analysis developed in this Chapter will be used in Chapter 5: Identity, Chapter 6: Agency, and Chapter 7: Ideology.

The chapter begins with a review of previous literature on how video games have been analysed and approached. It will be identified that there are two broad types of approaches to video games: one that centres on video game structure as the object of analysis (game centric) and the other that focuses on the player as the object of analysis (player-centric). By developing an understanding of these approaches, it can be highlighted that there is a need to continue to develop critical hybrid approaches to video games that consider both game structure and the player agency, as they are both comprehending what occurs when video games are engaged with. There are such critical hybrid approaches already, such as Mukherjee's (2015) that will be studied, that can inform the development of the approach used within this work.

It will next be detailed how the concept of cognitive mapping will be used to develop an approach to analysing AAA video games in the following chapters. Cognitive mapping is understood in relation to Jameson (1984) and Toscano (2012) (Toscano & Kinkle, 2015) work on the topic. Cognitive mapping is the formation of a mental map of an occurrence of phenomena in everyday life, which allows for a mental image of an otherwise invisible phenomena. Toscano and Kinkle observe how cognitive mapping can 'enable individuals and collectives to render their place in a capitalist world-system intelligible' (2015, p. 7), effectively making ideological structures, and the individual's relationship to them, visible.

The cognitive mapping exercise that will be undertaken in the analysis in Chapter 5, Chapter 6, and Chapter 7 has two requirements. First, the player will be established as the 'entrepreneurial player'. This is a form of subjectivity in play that is informed by the form of subjectivity known as the entrepreneurial self that was discussed in

Chapter 3. This form of subjectivity influences how the player will construct their sense of self in the play-space (Chapter 5), what form of agency they have in the play-space (Chapter 6), and how the AAA video game itself is consumed (Chapter 7). The player needs to be conceptualised as such in analysis of the AAA video game as it is used to reflect the collapse of the leisure and labour domains, indicating that play is not taking place in a domain that is solely for leisure. As the entrepreneurial player does not separate their thought and action in the play-space from other neoliberal structures of society, how they undertake their play will be characterised by economic logics.

The entrepreneurial player's way of conducting their play will be detailed with a series of directives. This is the second requirement of the cognitive mapping exercise. AAA video games have identifiable trends which can be noted in an analysis of them, allowing a cognitive mapping exercise conducted by the research to highlight areas of ideological significance. As stated, the entrepreneurial player will not treat the play-space as a separate space from neoliberal structures and their actions will be influenced by economic criteria. I identify the following directives that the entrepreneurial player will use to motivate and direct their play:

- "What can I do?"
- "How efficiently can I do it?"
- "Why am I doing this?"
- "What do I get out of this?"
- "How can I play more?"
- "How can I play better?"

These directives will be arrived at by establishing how the AAA video game is engaged with. There are processes in the playing of video games that range from the player's initial engagement with the video game structures, the player recognising their level of agency within the play-space, and how the video game functions as an object upon the player's engagement. Each directive signals a step in the process of playing and consuming a AAA video game.

The first two directives (“what can I do?” and “how efficiently can I do it?”) relate to the initial engagement with the game as the player forms their sense of self in the play-space. Providing answers to these directives by critically reading how the player initially engages with play will make neoliberal ideology in the play-space visible. To do this, maps and menus have been selected as objects of analysis as they are features of a video game that the player uses to understand their role in playing it in Chapter 5. The next two directives (“why am I doing this?” and “what do I get out of this?”) relate to the form of agency the player has in the play-space. Providing answers to these directives will be done with a critical reading of how what the player tends to be motivated to do in AAA video games. As such, non-playable characters and level progression systems have been selected as objects of analysis for Chapter 6. The final two directives (“how can I play more?” and “how can I play better?”) relate to how AAA video games are consumed and how they become sites of further consumption. Providing answers to these directives will be done by analysing how AAA video games are consumed. As such, downloadable content and microtransactions are the objects of analysis in Chapter 7.

The chapter will conclude by detailing how the observations made in answering the directives by analysing different features of the AAA video game will be used to assess the corruption of play by neoliberal ideology. The ideal conditions of play that were established in Chapter 1 by studying Caillois’ work will be used as a criterion to assess whether play in the analysed areas of play kept to these ideal conditions. Play can be considered corrupted if it is not a free activity, not separate from everyday life, lacks uncertainty in its outcomes, and is not unproductive.

Approaching Video Games

It is beneficial to study how other academic literature approaches the topic of finding significance within and around the video game medium prior to developing a critical approach. Chapter 1 has already covered a history of debate within games studies, specifically in the form of ludology and narratology debate, and the debates that this chapter will study relate further to the ludology and narratology topic. Early academic approaches to video games centred the structure of the video game medium itself as

the object of study (Eskelinen, 2001) (Frasca, 2003) (Johnson, 2016) (Rouse III, 2016) (Wolf, 2016) before player-centric models were constructed in response (Consalvo, 2007) (Artemesia, et al., 2009) (Chen, 2009) (Shaw, 2013) (Shaw, 2014) (Consalvo & Vazquez, 2015). What this review of previous work will achieve is to first historicise the different approaches taken to studying video games and allow for a close analysis of each approach, revealing a way in which the methodology developed in this thesis can build upon previous work.

Prominent games studies theorist Juul posited in 2008 that ‘the new conflict in video game studies is between those who study players and those who study games’ (2008). This is in reference to games studies being perceived to be moving away from the ludology and narratology debate towards a debate between structurally focussed approaches and player-centric approaches. As games studies formed as an academic discipline, there was a scepticism among ludologists about the relationship between game design and narrative elements (Aarseth, 2016, p. 187). There were those that argued against this (Kirkland, 2005, p. 176) (Simons, 2007) and it was this division that defined the debate. Despite this disagreement, it has been noted by Behrenshausen that both sides of the debate at least implicitly agreed that video games are fairly formal structures that allow for player experiences (2012, p. 874), which means that the structural approach to video games was not exclusive to the ludologists.

Early structural focuses are especially prevalent in the works of notable ludologists however (Eskelinen, 2001) (Frasca, 2003). The structural approach is most explicit in Eskelinen’s work on what is deemed the ‘gaming situation’ (2001). Eskelinen’s work constructs the playing of the video game as a situational event and views gaming or ludic elements separate to those of narrative elements which are separate again from the player (2001). For Eskelinen, the gaming situation here is viewed as a meeting between player and game structure, meaning that player agency and game structure are two separate components. This approach conceptualised the playing of a video game as a ‘configurative practice’ that required a series of manipulations of ‘temporal, causal, spatial and functional relations’, setting apart the video game medium from others like film and TV (Eskelinen, 2001). As well as having the evident

desire in early game studies work to separate the video game from other media, the work clearly emphasises the formal structures of the video game (its assemblage and rules) as the focus for studying the medium.

The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies encapsulates these approaches as the first two sections on technological aspects and formal aspects are dominated by structurally focussed analysis of video games (Wolf & Perron, 2016, pp. 1-132). Such analysis takes the form of Johnson's analysis of artificial intelligence in video games (2016, pp. 10-18), Rouse III's study of game design (2016, pp. 83-90), and Wolf's analysis of the 'worlds' video games offer (2016, pp. 125-132). Player-centric models do not emerge until later in this collection of works. This is likely due to the development of player-centric models initially being a response to the structurally focussed approaches.

The works mentioned previously (Johnson, 2016) (Rouse III, 2016) (Wolf, 2016) are intended to introduce a method of approaching a video game rather than actually doing that analysis within the work. However, they still demonstrate a clear focus on video game structures as how to approach video games. Each of these works indicate a general trend within game studies to begin study at the medium before anything else. Johnson's work is largely concerned with how video game AI came about and how it is developed but it does infer that AI is there for the player to interact with in order for them to engage with and be challenged (2016, p. 10). In focussing upon the technological abilities of the video game medium Johnson's work clearly centres the video game structure itself as the key object in games studies, the player is merely someone interacting with the sophisticated medium which changes around the player.

Rouse III similarly centres on the video game's formal structure as the object of study, going as far as to argue that 'game design is the most important aspect of video games because it is the one that determines whether the game is compelling to play' (2016, p. 83). For Rouse III, it is in approaching games via their design that will allow us to find meaning in games as it is the design that empowers players to be or do something (2016, p. 90). The structure is what produces changes to the player

according to Rouse III, and therefore is the required component of study in relation to video games.

Wolf studies 'worlds' within video games, with a view to understand the visible or narrative world the video game constructs for the player to engage. I would define this as the "game world", which is distinct from the "play-space" (as was discussed in Chapter 1), a notion I discuss throughout which refers to the mental and philosophical realm of play. For Wolf, the game's world is closely linked to its design as it is the means by which the player learns how to play the game (2016, p. 125). Wolf also observes that game worlds are often 'overlooked' in discussing the impact of the video game medium, claiming the video game world as what is experienced vicariously by the player is what has allowed video games to become part of wider cultural and societal contexts (2016, p. 131). For Wolf, it is the structure that makes the video game a significant medium and as such it should be the focus of any study of it.

All of these works either explicitly or implicitly focus on the video game medium itself as the integral component of studying video games, despite highlighting divergent issues and approaches on different components of the video game's structure. Approaching the artificial intelligence in video games requires emphasis on a technological aspect of the medium, approaching game design mobilises attention to an aspect of video game production, and approaching "worlds" places the video game within wider cultural and social contexts. Each of these approaches centre on the formal structure above anything else, including the agency of player. The purpose of a structurally focussed approach is to emphasise the importance of the medium, suiting the motivating factor behind much ludic research that was noted by Bryce and Rutter, who observed that ludologists wanted to 'develop a whole new research and practical approach' (2006, p. 7) for the video game medium. Retroactively, it seems that these approaches were grounded in a desire to build games studies and there is clear room on which they can be built by lending more importance to factors like player agency or wider ideological structures. I would argue that these structural focuses on the analysis of video games were necessary to the development of the

game studies discipline, similar to that of the early ludic scholarship discussed in Chapter 1. However, when they appeared, play-centric approaches were just as vital as they began to paint a more complete picture of the role played by video games in society and culture.

Player-centric approaches to analysing video games came about in response to the preoccupation with video game structures. The turn towards more player-centric focuses was necessary during the development of games studies as it did much to demonstrate how important players are to understanding the video game medium. Consalvo articulated this concern when observing that structures are there to begin gameplay and that 'we cannot stop at structures as a way of understanding the gameplay experience' (2009, p. 415). This articulates the concern that significance relating to factors beyond structure, like player agency, was being missed. For Consalvo, the focus on structures does not create a complete picture when researching video games. I would argue that Consalvo's most significant observation is that video games should be thought of as 'contextual, dynamic activity, which players must engage with for meaning to be made. Furthermore, it is only through that engagement that the game is made to mean' (2009, p. 411). This statement implies that for video games to mean anything they have to be played, which requires a player to produce a meaning from the structure. This infers that analysing the structure on its own is reductive or at best a descriptive practice. This builds on the structurally focussed analysis of Eskelinen's work that thought of the playing of a video game as a situational practice reliant on the formal structure of the video game. Consalvo would observe that the gaming situation would mean nothing without a player to instigate it and that player's agency merits further study.

Player-centric approaches can take multiple forms. These can include interviews with players (Shaw, 2013) (Shaw, 2014), studying different ways of playing (Consalvo, 2007) (Consalvo & Vazquez, 2015), or an ethnography of play (Chen, 2009) (Artemesia, et al., 2009). Each of these approaches are different but centre on the player of the video game when it comes to approaching the medium, echoing

Consalvo's assertion that for the structure to mean anything it has to be engaged with.

Consalvo's work on cheating highlighted in 2007 that in relation to what games do to players there was a 'comparatively small amount of research concerning how players themselves organise their gameplay' (2007, p. 83). Consalvo sought to offer a corrective to this by analysing gaming practices, specifically discussing if the use of supplementary items like detailed guides on how to complete the video game is or is not cheating (2007, pp. 83-92). The aim of this was to offer a more detailed account of how gameplay was experienced and changed by the player; this was done by studying the accounts of a select group of players using in-depth interviews (Consalvo, 2007, pp. 83-84). This method was also used in a later study on the topic of cheating in video games (Consalvo & Vazquez, 2015). Observations from player interviews were used to draw conclusions and make observations on what the player experienced. For example, from interviews Consalvo offered the definition of cheating as being 'the introduction of deception and possible chaos into the game world, which is shared with other players' and so using a detailed guide to inform play was not cheating (2007, p. 92). Questions in a later study around cheating allowed for conclusions that observed the different nature of private and social games based on the respondents' differing opinions on whether or not they would care if they knew someone was cheating at the game (Consalvo & Vazquez, 2015, pp. 9-10).

What both studies do is concentrate on the actions of the player and draw the significance of the playing of a video game from there. The structures become secondary to the agency of the player. In relation to this work, the concept of cheating in video games was discussed in Chapter 1. I do not agree with the definition of cheating offered by player interviews, which identifies cheating as the introduction of deception and chaos in world that is shared by other players (Consalvo, 2007, p. 92). I would argue that this rather refers to unfairness in play, but it is understandable how individual players would feel as though this is cheating, as they feel as though other players are not respecting the rules. I find it important to highlight this as the

video game structures are not properly considered in this definition of cheating. Cheating implies that the rules are *broken*, deception and chaos are more unfair but a strategic way of playing. As such a thorough understanding of cheating cannot be arrived at through a purely player-centric approach due to how different people perceive the way games are played, hence why the structure needs to be considered as well.

In-depth interviews have also been used by Shaw to study identification (2013) (2014). For example, Shaw uses in-depth interviews with people from marginalised groups that play video games in her work *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. Shaw argues that 'in order to study representation in video games, researchers must understand how players actually interact with games and how game play contexts shape the implications of a given representation' (2014, p. 37). This relates to Consalvo's observation that the game is made to mean something through engagement. The 'context' of a gaming scenario is dependent on the player here, emphasising the player's importance in defining the meaning of the playing of a video game. Shaw also describes her approach to analysing video games as a 'necessary' shift from previous approaches, stating that her work can 'help produce a different kind of knowledge about identity, identification, and media representation in video games' (2014, p. 52). This is likely an acknowledgement of the preoccupation with structures not being sufficient to analyse issues like identity and identification of the players of video games. Shaw takes a similar approach in earlier work in which she uses interviews to demonstrate that identification in video games 'requires that players see the video game character/avatar as separate from themselves' (2013, p. 358). Shaw also notes that future research on 'games [that] promote (or discourage) identification with video games characters is necessary' (2013, p. 358). With this observation, Consalvo's declaration that structures need to be played to have meaning is echoed again. Shaw's implication that games promote or discourage a form of interaction within the medium makes the player the object of analysis in approaching video games.

Play ethnographies are another player-centric approach. Artemesia and co-author's justify an ethnography of play from their own perspective by stating that the 'ethnographer is required, to varying degrees, to actively participate in the culture she is studying' and that 'you cannot observe a virtual world without being inside it, and in order to be inside it, you have to be "embodied"' (2009, p. 196). Artemesia et al use ethnography as part of a mixed methods approach that also utilises formal and interviews (Artemesia, et al., 2009, pp. 201-204). The purpose of gathering information about video games in this way was too 'capture the voices and practices of many people, with many different points of view, including the many voices within themselves' (Artemesia, et al., 2009, p. 210), and it is from these voices that the significance of video games can be deduced. The study clearly identifies that the significance of the video game medium comes from those who play video games before anything else. The player's 'voices', both in terms of the researcher playing and those playing around them are identified as the component of the video game as where analysis should lie.

Chen's study likewise is an ethnography of play, in an effort to analyse the 'communication and coordination practices of a group of players in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game...World of Warcraft' (2009, p. 47). This is done 'by contrasting two nights of game playing while also contrasting the practices of this group against the generally conceived notion of how a group like this operates' (Chen, 2009, p. 47). Through approaching video games this way, Chen is able to observe how social practices form around the playing of a video game (2009, pp. 69-70). It is through this engagement and the social bonds that form around it that video games gain their meaning. The video game structure comes to mean something that is dependent upon the context of the player and their actions. As with the previous player-centric approaches discussed, this study identifies the object of analysis as the player.

Player-centric approaches to video games were adopted in response to the bias towards formal structures (Consalvo, 2009, p. 411), whilst not entirely dismissing the importance of the video game's structural characteristics but prioritising the player's

agency as the object of analysis. This approach to studying video games was developed in order to attempt to emphasise that it is players that give meaning to the formal structures of video games. Both structure-focussed and player-centric approaches have been essential for the development of the analysis of video games, especially when considering the conceptual tools developed by the different approaches. Notably Eskelinen's gaming situation (2001) and Consalvo's (Consalvo, 2007) (Consalvo & Vazquez, 2015) and Shaw's (Shaw, 2013) (Shaw, 2014) analysis of forms of play and use of in-depth interviews to reveal the significance of the video game medium to individual's. These approaches, however, can be built upon to better reveal the interdependent nature of video game structure and player agency.

Developing a Critical Approach

Assessing the various approaches to video games in the previous section of the chapter has revealed that there are merits to both structure-focussed and player-centric approaches to video games. What conclusion one can draw from this is that a combination of elements of these approaches can be used to build a more comprehensive methodology for analysing video games. Player and structure must be included in any complete analysis. From understanding these approaches and the motivating factors behind them, this thesis can begin to develop a critical method of approach to the video game medium. This involves a hybrid approach to video games that incorporates the importance of both structure and player agency, noting that both elements are interdependent and are meaningless without the other. In this respect, a previous study that incorporates both structural and player-centric approaches (Mukherjee, 2015) can be analysed to help inform the approach taken by this thesis in its analysis. The thesis then can develop its own method of analysis by discussing the potential of cognitive mapping (Jameson, 1984) (Toscano, 2012) (Toscano & Kinkle, 2015) in analysing video games for ideological significance.

Structure-focussed and player-centric models of analysis ultimately produce a binary understanding of video games that needs to be developed in order to reveal more insights. Adopting one approach or the other is reductive, limiting the video game medium to either formal characteristics or an individual's interpretation of a game,

at a particular moment in time, under a particular set of circumstances. Behrenshausen identifies this issue stating:

By insisting that gaming consists of contests between diametrically opposing forces, such projects urge researchers to identify one of these as ultimately dominant, and establish relations of negative difference between that dominant force and other forces acting in a gaming situation (2012, p. 880).

I argue that neither structure nor player agency is dominant over the other, both are interdependent. In attempting to avoid the reductionism present in focussing on the video game's structure, as was highlighted by Consalvo (2009, p. 411), the player-centric perspective reduces the approach to the inverse, prioritising the player's agency over the ability of the structure to affect play.

In response to these issues, Behrenshausen states that 'additional conceptual tools might assist game studies in addressing the epistemological and methodological limitations of the active audience for analyzing contemporary gaming situations' (Behrenshausen, 2012, p. 880). The 'active audience' here refers to the underlying theoretical method in player-centric approaches to video games. This notion implies that the player 'does not *merely consume* media contents or artifacts, but also *produces* something – an experience, social or economic capital, new meanings – by engaging with a video game' (Behrenshausen, 2012, p. 875). This directly relates to the issue raised by Consalvo who stated 'it is only through that engagement that the game is made to mean' (2009, p. 411). The player is active in *producing* the meaning and significance of the video game medium. As previously mentioned however, this is as reductive as focussing solely on the video game's formal structure.

Behrenshausen sets out the need for more conceptual tools in studying the complexity of video games, stating that 'research on player practices does not completely escape the forms of reductionism it sets out to avoid' (2012, p. 872). Player practices here refers to the player-centric approaches that have been discussed previously in this chapter. As Behrenshausen states, these approaches are

too reliant on the active audience member. Likewise, structural focuses fail to consider the extent to which player agency is significant in shaping the play experience. Behrenshausen notes that the limits of the active audience member and player-centric approaches are evident in a study on gold farming in World of Warcraft (2012, pp. 880-881). This refers to study discussed in Chapter 1, gold farmers are people employed to play the game by abusive and exploitative bosses (Swearingen, 2017). Despite this, it was claimed in a study that 'gold farming is a... revolt against the futuristic accumulation of digital capital, reappropriating the value-creating capacity that publishers privatize and fence around with intellectual property rights' (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2009, p. 149). Behrenshausen in response to this observation states 'celebrating the creativity of not only the gold farmers but also their abusive bosses seems like a naïve, myopic, and ultimately unproductive way to begin understanding the nuanced interplay of forces at work in this gaming situation' (2012, p. 881). It is within this that the limitation of the player as an active audience member is exposed. The reductive nature of the approach misses the 'nuanced interplay of forces' that Behrenshausen highlights. These forces relate to video game structure, player agency, and wider ideological structures. These wider ideological structures (in this case the dominant neoliberal ideology) will be considered in this thesis' own methodology.

Ruffino offers the notion of 'creative game studies' as an antidote to potential limitations of different approaches to video games (2018). Ruffino describes creative game studies as offering 'a mode of writing about and intervening in game culture which is *intuitive, timely, performative, ethical, anti- authoritarian and anxious*' (2018, p. 12, emphasis added). It is the intent of creative game studies to 'critique and create video game culture through a series of interventions and inventions of new differences' (Ruffino, 2018, p. 13). Creative game studies approach is Derridean in relation to it being 'anxious', with Ruffino stating that the approach:

...aims to deconstruct the similarities and differences between groupings. The anxiety implied in this perspective results from acknowledging that there are always differences between the things

that are usually kept together, and similarities between those things that are kept apart. (2018, p. 19)

In line with the Derridean approach, the deconstruction has already taken place within the text and it is the task of the researcher to demonstrate this. Ruffino's work is significant in identifying that inventive approaches to video games can reveal new insights by deconstructing the video game and surrounding cultural and socio-economic elements. It is best that the approach to studying even specific components of video games is not limited to a certain element of the video game, rather it needs to encompass different elements of the medium and surrounding culture. Mukherjee analyses agency in the early *Assassin's Creed* games by looking at how the player's experience of 'becoming' their avatar is similar to how a character in the video game itself becomes the protagonists that the player goes onto control (Mukherjee, 2015, pp. 206-207). Mukherjee makes this observation simply by looking at narrative elements of this game and likening it to ludic aspects of playing the game itself. Mukherjee's analysis observes that video games 'with their multiple play and narrative experiences form not a *text* but a text as an assemblage' (Mukherjee, 2015, p. 17). This viewing of the playing of the game as an assemblage calls to mind the sort of approach outlined by Behrenshausen and the need to avoid reductionist approaches to the video game. Behrenshausen states:

Understanding video gaming as an assemblage means conceptualizing it not as the meeting of stable, bounded, autonomous unities colliding in pre-given space, but as an ongoing process of arrangement that organizes elements in ways that determine their effectivity (their capacities to affect bodies, be affected by bodies, and influence the assemblage as a whole) (2012, p. 882).

Mukherjee's analysis encompasses this approach, avoiding focussing specifically on either the player or structure but instead viewing the playing of the video game as multiple forces at work. The player is using what the structure provides in order to experience the playing of the video game. Mukherjee aims to 'analyse the story, the game rules and the experience of the game world as intrinsically linked' (Mukherjee,

2015, p. 9), in doing so encompassing formal structure and player agency in that analysis. As Mukherjee states, arguments made from a strictly ludic point of view, such as Poole's (which generally focuses on perspective, design, progression, and reward) (Poole, 2000, p. 174), rely on the idea that narrative in games is a prosthesis of 'pure play' (Mukherjee, 2015, p. 10). This observation also relates to the work discussed in this chapter, focussing solely on one aspects of the playing of a video game relies on reducing the significance of the other components. Mukherjee, in setting out to approach the video game in a more all-encompassing manner, is able to observe how play in video games is an assemblage of factors that are integrally linked. Without player agency, the structure means little and without the game structure, the player's agency is relatively meaningless.

Mukherjee makes an important observation about understanding video games, noting that:

Anyone who has played video games will know that there are some aspects of 'gameplay' (as the playing experience is called) that are unmappable and that are perceivable but not describable. The colloquial description for this is that the player is 'in the game'. The story, the game rules and the machine code constantly intersect and transform each other as well as the emotions, the muscular movements and the spontaneous reactions of the player. A traditional humanities framework cannot grasp these less perceivable elements of the being 'in the game' experience (2015, p. 17).

Part of this statement that is especially relevant to the aims of this thesis is the idea of elements of gameplay being 'unmappable' and 'perceivable but not describable'. Attempts can, and should, be made to map these elements of gameplay in order to better reveal their significance and role in shaping what play is. Additionally, more traditional methods of analysis are ill-equipped to make the unmappable visible. This is where the concept of cognitive mapping can be deployed in order to engage with these elements of play in AAA video games.

Toscano and Kinkle describe work that has emerged under the banner of cognitive mapping as aiming to 'enable individuals and collectives to render in their place in a capitalist world-system intelligible' (2015, p. 7) which can include making ideological structures visible. Using the notion of cognitive mapping the thesis can read the video game as a terrain in which the individual's relation to the dominant neoliberal ideology is made visible. Toscano highlights how this form of mapping often comes about from 'a widespread demand for critical or oppositional forms of orientation around contemporary capitalist society (2012, p. 65). In this respect, cognitive mapping is something that fits perfectly with the effort of this thesis to show the impact of neoliberalism in video game playing. Indeed, there is great critical potential in cognitive mapping exercises to analyse how video games are played and how they motivate us to play.

When the notion of cognitive mapping has been discussed academically in relation to video games in past works it has often related to the more literal act of the player "mapping" required actions onto the controller used and so referencing their actual cognitive abilities (Shafe & Carbonara, 2014) (Rogers, et al., 2015). This 'cognitive mapping' is not the same as the cognitive mapping in this thesis that refers to it in the aesthetic sense as outlined by Toscano (2012) (Toscano & Kinkle, 2015), which is based upon the concept as developed by Jameson (1984) (1992). Jameson outlines the purpose of cognitive mapping in relation to the individual's relationship to the city space, stating it is used 'to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of the city's structure as a whole' (1984, p. 90). As has been highlighted, Jameson attempted to call notions of cognitive mapping to mind to challenge contemporary geographers' notions of urban space (Graham, et al., 1992, p. 14). It is possible to extend this purpose to the individual's relationship to other supposedly unmappable areas. Shields observes how work extending from Jameson's notions of cognitive mapping reveal that urban space was 'replete with symbolic importance' rather than Cartesian, rational modernist empiricism had rendered urban spaces into neutral voids (1992, p. 43). The aesthetic of cognitive mapping reveals the symbolic importance of immaterial space to then be understood and analysed. Whilst very

much based within knowledge and analysis of concepts of urban space and life, cognitive mapping is a flexible methodological approach to analysis.

My aim in using an aesthetic of cognitive mapping is to reveal the play-space as *replete with symbolic importance*. It can reveal significant elements of the play-space, such as the role of level progression in fostering neoliberal subjectivities. The mapping of social and ideological networks is what is significant about the notion of cognitive mapping and the approaches inferred within the term. The “cognitive” nature of the exercise is significant. The ideological significance is not immediately visible, it must be drawn and charted using theoretical research methods to give form to the immaterial. An example of cognitive mapping being used to study space is how human geographers used the methodology to demonstrate how tourists come to engage with place. Walmsley and Jenkins note how ‘the world as perceived by individuals is often very different from the “real” one and that the nature of this perceptual and experiential world has a significant influence on human behavior’ (1992, p. 269). It was considered how tourists use identifiers within unfamiliar places to focus and judge their engagement in unfamiliar environments. My aim is to extend this practice and demonstrate that cognitive mapping as method can not only operate to show how the individual engages with digital space but that it can also reveal the ideological significance of such engagements between individual and space. Shields notes how concepts of space can have material consequences (2017). Indeed, the deployment of cognitive mapping has the ability to demonstrate this and in doing so consider the consequences the structuring of the play-space has on play enabled by AAA video games.

There is precedent for applying cognitive mapping to areas of study outside of human geography. Such an example can be found in the work of Lizardo (2009) who used it to reveal the significance of the individual’s relationships to wider capitalist socio-economic structures. Specifically, Lizardo uses the notion of cognitive mapping to study the ‘metonymic relation of dynamic changes in the symbolic structure of the Devil as a “mapping symbol” to the deep structure of capitalist accumulation and the penetration of capitalist logic into the communal and personal realms’ (2009, p. 605).

The Devil, as a mapping symbol, is used as a sense-making device in order to 'translate the abstract and "spectral" logic of the capitalist system into terms that are compatible with the moral logic of everyday interpersonal relations' (Lizardo, 2009, p. 605). Lizardo's use of the Devil in a cognitive mapping exercise reveals that 'in both the popular imagination and the more delimited fields of literary creation, there is a clear link between certain representations of the Devil and the different stages of development of the capitalist mode of production' (2009, pp. 608-609). An example of how this observation is made is in how peasant workers in Colombia use the phrase 'signing a contract with the Devil' to refer to anyone who enters into wage labour and makes good money as it is perceived that they should be working on their own land (Lizardo, 2009, p. 610). This phrase places the Devil in relation to capitalism, as being the one who allows the capitalist worker to prosper against perceived notions of how things should be. Lizardo also gives a more contemporary example of the cognitive mapping exercise in which he demonstrates how the Devil in the film *The Devil's Advocate* (1997) is used as a 'direct embodiment of the deterritorializing powers of (global/financial) capital' (2009, p. 613). The cultural significance of the Devil and the functioning of capitalism form a mental map in which observations can be drawn about everyday life within capitalist systems. The idea of the Devil and its role in cultural and social practice are what makes the ideological structures visible in Lizardo's work.

This thesis can use a similar method to that of Lizardo's in having the entrepreneurial player serve as a mapping symbol for the structure of neoliberal ideology in the play-space. The state of play in AAA video games can be used to diagnose the way in which neoliberalism is affecting human thought and action. Toscano notes that there is a need to understand the 'aesthetic dimension' of social research, emphasising the importance and relevance of using art in understanding the present (2012, p. 80). Whilst this thesis is not using art as method, this call to understand the aesthetic dimension can be transferred to understanding the aesthetic relationship between

player and video game. What this play *looks like*³⁷ can reveal the ways in which neoliberalism has altered play.

This approach is also influenced by Back's notion of live methods. Back highlights the 'fleeting, disturbed, multiple and sensory aspects' of digital culture and the need for research methods that are 'mobile, sensuous and operate from multiple vantage points' (2012, p. 18). Live methods are a response to this. As will be discussed in the Chapter 5, the establishment of neoliberalism as the dominant ideology has produced a world that is fluid, shifting, and unstable. To understand and analyse this world, our approaches to it need to adapt to this fluidity, as more formal structures may not be able to reveal otherwise unreadable, invisible, or unmappable details. The approach undertaken in this analysis is designed to deal with the fleeting, and sometimes contradictory, nature of play in AAA video games. It also assumes the attempted totality of the neoliberal ideology that seeks to influence all thought and behaviour. The mapping seeks to make this totality visible in the fleeting and adaptive digital play-space.

I believe the use of cognitive mapping to study the relationship between neoliberalism and video games is timely, and also relates to how Ruffino describes creative game studies as:

...a method for thinking of interventions within game culture as organised around the timing of writing. Creative Game Studies is made of interventions that use to their own advantage the dissonant pace and rhythm that differentiates the practice of writing from the cadence of the stories of progression and crisis of the medium of the video game. (2018, p. 124)

I argue that in those moment of time the neoliberal ideological hegemony is reflected in the structure and play of AAA video games. With the cognitive mapping method, I seek to demonstrate this reflection in order for it to be observed and eventually

³⁷ As it appears in the mind's eye when viewed within the neoliberal context rather than its literal appearance.

opposed through creative methods of play and production. Cognitive mapping is needed to give form to an otherwise unobservable abstract phenomenon that takes place between the player and the AAA video game. This particular use of cognitive mapping and its formation (which will be detailed in the next section of this chapter) belongs to this moment in time, concerned with the current neoliberal hegemony and current trends within AAA video games. The cognitive mapping method can be reconstructed and adapted to different times and topics depending on what is being researched and analysed.

The cognitive mapping method can be helpfully envisioned by studying two methods of approaching completely different kinds of media. Firstly, Bordwell's identification of using spectator engagement with film media (1985) can be used to explain how the player can be used as a position to analyse AAA video games from. Following on from this, the 'walkthrough method' developed by Light, Burgess, and Duguay to study the use of apps (2018) can be used to demonstrate how different elements of the architecture of AAA video games can be identified for study as well as how they can be studied. Combining these two approaches demonstrates how both subject and object agency can be analysed to produce a full picture of the ideological significance of the video game medium.

The cognitive mapping method of analysis can be deployed in a way that is like how methods that study the spectator are used in film studies. Bordwell notes that many films will assume that 'the spectator will initially act upon those assumptions [their preconceived notions relating to the film's content] which we use to construct a coherent everyday world' (1985, p. 47). Bordwell draws on research to observe that perceivers of a story make use of a 'master schema...an abstraction of narrative structure which embodies typical expectations about how to classify events and relate parts to the whole' (1985, p. 34). To summarise this, Bordwell notes 'perceivers tend to use this master schema as a framework for understanding, recalling, and summarizing a particular narrative' (1985, p. 34). From this a generalisation on media observation and engagement can be drawn, which is that dominant ideological structures will greatly influence how a piece of media is engaged with. Bordwell's

spectator carries their preconceived ideological notions with them into media engagement, whether they are then challenged or not is down to what the content of the media they engage with is. This schema, as Bordwell refers to it, of “how and what things are” is the mental map a spectator of media has. Charting this map and its eventual projection onto a piece of media can reveal the significance of the ideological relationship between media and individual.

The leap from spectator to player involves considering the role of the subject in question. Hanson discusses Bordwell’s work on the spectator (1985) that views the protagonist of a film as the ‘principle causal agent within a closed and unified time and space’ (Hanson, 2018, p. 82). If the viewer of a film pauses the movie then they can freely hypothesise on events within it, but those events and the narrative will remain fixed and unalterable. The player of a video game however is often the principle causal agent to the video game medium and when they pause the video game they can think and hypothesise upon events but when the medium resumes, the player can effect some change from this pause. Bordwell’s theoretical work holds in relation to video games, but the principal casual agency shifts to the player. The ability to alter outcomes within the observed medium gives the player a degree of influence on the outcomes of the medium. The video game may well have a protagonist within its narrative in the way a film would, but the spectator of a film cannot instruct the protagonists what to do in the way a player of video game can. For example, the player of *Mass Effect 3* (2012) has plenty of opportunities to influence what decisions and actions the protagonist of that narrative makes. I argue that this means that the player’s relationship to the play-space becomes the prism through which to observe the ideological significance of the video game medium.

There is merit in approaching video games through this critical lens using cognitive mapping, as Jameson, from whose work the notion of cognitive mapping is drawn, did similar work on film. Jameson framed large scale periods and placed film within them in order to identify the social and cultural significance of the medium (Walsh, 1996, p. 482). A stated aim of this thesis is to place video games within a neoliberal context and in doing so demonstrate the significance they hold in the formation of

social relations and the impact they have upon everyday life and being. A cognitive mapping methodology, using the player of the video game to map the terrain of the play-space, is how this will be achieved.

Relating the spectator of a film and the player of a game does not minimise the importance of video game structure, player and structure need to be analysed in tandem to provide a full picture of the ideological significance of the medium. A methodology known as the walkthrough method can be used to demonstrate the way in which the methodology of cognitive mapping can be used to reveal the ideological significance of a digital medium. The walkthrough method involves:

...establishing an app's environment of expected use by identifying and describing its vision, operating model and modes of governance. It then deploys a walkthrough technique to systematically and forensically step through the various stages of app registration and entry, everyday use and discontinuation of use. The walkthrough method establishes a foundational corpus of data upon which can be built a more detailed analysis of an app's intended purpose, embedded cultural meanings and implied ideal users and uses. (Light, et al., 2018, p. 881)

Analysing apps in such a way allows for new insights based upon critical reflections of use. The method is conducted via a 'step-by-step observation and documentation of an app's screens, features and flows of activity – slowing down the mundane actions and interactions that form part of normal app use in order to make them salient and therefore available for critical analysis' (Light, et al., 2018, p. 882). This approach is reflected in the method of the cognitive mapping approach that will be discussed in the next section of this chapter. Viewing elements of the AAA video game's structure open them up for a step-by-step analysis. For this step-by-step observation to take place the processes of play must be identified. I argue that the best way to approach this is to envisage a player of the video game within broader contexts and to recognise what the game and the player *want* in terms of play.

From the work of Bordwell and Light, I make a series of assumptions about how the AAA video game functions as an object and how the individual engages with the format. These assumptions will allow me to draw out the directives that I will detail in the following section of this Chapter. The first assumption relates to the work of Bordwell, the AAA video game medium has an expected operation on the part of the player in line with the tropes and trends of the industry. As with the viewer of a Hollywood blockbuster, the player of a AAA video game has certain expectations of how their play and the game will unfold upon engagement. As both player and game are embedded within neoliberal structures it can be assumed that there is the potential for neoliberal subjectivities to be fostered within the space created. A cognitive mapping exercise can be used to reveal how this takes place. The next assumption relates to the walkthrough method, and that is the AAA video game and the player have an expected pattern of engagement as directed by how information and possibilities of play are organised by the video game structures. This means it is possible to conduct a step-by-step observation of how play would be likely to unfold upon the player engaging with the video game. The way the player would be likely to engage with a video game will allow for the establishment of directives of play to give form to how the player is motivated to act within a play-space that is embedded within neoliberal structures.

The Entrepreneurial Player and Discerning Directives

The mapping of the play-space will be done by establishing the player of a AAA video as the entrepreneurial player and detailing the directives according to which the entrepreneurial player would play. The presence of an entrepreneurial subjectivity within the play-space will make neoliberal structures, and the player's relationship to them, visible.

The entrepreneurial player is a concept that details the result of a series of subjectification that individuals within neoliberal structures experience. As was discussed in Chapter 3, a form of selfhood termed the entrepreneurial self emerges in neoliberal structures. This form of selfhood is one which aligns with market logics and economic criteria. The entrepreneurial self understands and carries out their

thought and action according to economic criteria. The entrepreneurial self is fostered by the business ontology that has been discussed in this thesis, everything is understood as a business, as input and output, as a way to gain something from whatever has been undertaken. Play should serve as a natural barrier to this way of being, but the subjectivities and ontologies fostered by neoliberal structures can break down the barrier between play and everyday reality. Based on this, my notions of the entrepreneurial self are drawn from the work of Foucault (2010) and Fisher (2009). Foucault's homo economicus is brought into the currently neoliberal epoch with an understanding of the business ontology outlined by Fisher.

The player may wish to operate differently but as play is unbound from leisure it can be understood in economic terms. This means that entrepreneurial subjectivity will be carried into the play-space. In play, homo economicus can meet the homo ludens (human, the player or human at play)³⁸ that Huizinga discusses in his work (1949). Huizinga notes that all play has meaning, that there is no biological explanation for it, and that the fun element of play resists 'all analysis, all logical interpretation' (1949, pp. 1-3). Combining these observations with Caillois', that play is something that is free, separate, uncertain, and unproductive (2001, p. 43), we see an idea of play that is something that clashes against the value obsessiveness fostered by neoliberal ideology but can also produce meaningful experiences even if they cannot be quantified or analysed. The individual will be looking to declare that they are something or gain something from an experience that will address the motivations of rationality and efficiency as well as their need to define themselves as this demand can potentially not be satisfied in everyday reality. The player is seeking something from their play, the play thought of as input necessitates an output that the player can have. The player may be declaring they are a "warrior", "assassin", "criminal", "soldier" etc. but they all amount to "I am a productive individual that followed my objectives and optimised this use of my time". More likely, the phrase would be "I am a level 100 warrior", for example, or to call back to the Introduction "I am Gold

³⁸ I believe it is useful to think of the homo ludens concept as an individual suspending the normal governing laws and motives of human thought and action as they partake in play.

3!” (p. 7). The player, seeing their play as an opportunity, treats the activity like a business transaction and hence is recognised as the entrepreneurial player.

The use of the phrase entrepreneurial player does not infer that all players will approach the AAA video game in the same way, rather it demonstrates the idealised subject according to neoliberal ideology. It relates to the forms of subjectivities that are fostered by neoliberal structures. Imagining the entrepreneurial player and deploying this conceptualisation in a cognitive mapping exercise is the best way to reveal the presence of neoliberal ideology in the play that is enabled by AAA video games. Even if a specific player does not play in the way the cognitive mapping exercise identifies, there is still the ability to reveal how the AAA video game plays a role in wider neoliberal structures. It is also possible for the player to resist the corruption of play but they need the ability to do so. For example, in Chapter 5 it will be noted that the video games *Doom* (2016), *XCOM 2* (2016), and *Dark Souls* (2011) offer player’s the ability to resist neoliberal forms of play should they so choose to.

That entrepreneurial subjectivities are possible in the play-space means that the video game can be made to serve a purpose beyond enabling play. The pervasive nature of neoliberal ideology entails that it will affect the operation of the video game. I argue that this means the AAA video game will operate as an organ of neoliberal ideology and hence is a neoliberal object.

Althusser describes what he calls the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA or ISAs for plural), systems that ensure the reproduction of relations to production (2014, pp. 1-2). Althusser gives a non-exhaustive list of these apparatus being schools, political institutions, religious institutions, the family unit, information and news, publishing and distribution, and cultural apparatus to give an idea of the sort of institutions and public bodies that form the ideological state apparatus (2014, pp. 75-76). Each of these apparatuses form a ‘system’, in which the state ideology is realised (Althusser, 2014, pp. 76-77). AAA video games are within these apparatuses; their constructed worlds contribute to forming the system that reproduces the dominant ideology (neoliberalism). A central idea in Althusser’s work is that ‘ideology has a material existence’, with ISAs being realisations of an ideology (2014, p. 184). In this instance,

AAA video games serve this function except they are a digital manifestation of neoliberal ideology. Understanding AAA video games in relation to this observation implies that elements of it are digital manifestations of neoliberal ideology, making the AAA video game a neoliberal object. These are the elements that can reveal the symbolic importance of the AAA video game's architecture. This function needs to be made visible by the mapping of the video game, making the reproduction of neoliberal ideology visible. This can be done by assigning directives to trends within AAA video games. The purpose of constructing these directives is to consider how the entrepreneurial subject would approach the AAA video game, neoliberalism's idealised mode of human thought and action. The identified trends will be taken and given form by constructing questions they motivate the player to ask of their video game.

These trends can be encompassed in three broad ways of describing different processes of playing AAA video games. They are as followed:

- Means of engagement with the play through which the player forms their identity in the play-space (Chapter 5: Identity)
- The degree and significance of player agency over play enabled by AAA video games (Chapter 6: Agency)
- The ideological structure of AAA video games as an organ of neoliberal ideology (Chapter 7: Ideology)

These three elements of playing a video game cover the player recognising their role in the play-space, exercising their agency in the play-space, and how, once within the play-space, the AAA video game becomes a site of further consumption. Identity deals with the images on the screen and the options the player has. Agency encompasses the ways in which play is motivated and what the player is hoping to achieve through play. Ideology deals with the how play is consumed as an experience and why it is consumed in various ways.

Firstly, in terms of identity, the subject of analysis will be the way in which the player engages with the game through maps and character and inventory menus. The

reason for focussing on menus and maps is the way these means of engagement can both encourage and constrain the way a player can interact with the game, directing the player to think and act according to the set parameters. To make this direction more visible, video game structures that organise player engagement (such as maps and menus) encourage the entrepreneurial player to ask; “what can I do?” and “how efficiently can I do it?” As stated, maps and menus in AAA video games will be used as the mapping symbol when this part of AAA video games are analysed in Chapter 5. The reason for selecting maps and menus is due to their role in highlighting what the player can do and how they can do it. There is a trend in AAA video games where game world maps and inventory menus are busy with information about what the player can do. For example, objects of importance in the game world will be highlighted for the player and a way to get there will be signalled to them and inventory menus will often signal to the player if they can equip an item that will make them more efficient. In this regard, maps and menus let the player know what they could be doing and what the most efficient way to go about going it would be.

In terms of the degree and significance of player agency, the way in which the player is motivated to play and continue playing will demonstrate the form of player agency in the play-space and how player action can be motivated. This will entail studying level progression systems and non-playable characters. The directives of “why am I doing this?” and “what do I get out of this?” encapsulate how the entrepreneurial player would rationalise their actions in the play-space. Non-playable characters and level progression systems in AAA video games have been selected as objects of analysis for this part of the mapping exercise. These two features of video games have been selected as they demonstrate how player agency is directed in the play-space and what the player gains from following instruction. Non-playable characters in video games often give tasks to the player for them to complete, completion of these tasks often leads to the player increasing their level in the game, helping their avatar to become stronger. Agency is shaped around these forms of tasks continually in many AAA video games.

In terms of the AAA video game as an organ of neoliberal ideology, the methods of consuming play will be analysed. Players can be offered endless play in the form of downloadable content and microtransactions. What these particular instances of (often) paid for content in AAA video games do is provide answers to the questions of “how can I play more?” and “how can I play better?” that the entrepreneurial player, seeking further or better experiences, will be directed to ask. The “more” demands the most of the exchange that the entrepreneurial player makes to begin playing and the “better” demands the most of that experience possible. Downloadable content and microtransactions will be objects of analysis in this part of the mapping exercise as they are how the AAA video game (after initial purchase) becomes a site of consumption as well as play. This demonstrates how the play-space of the AAA video game does not exist in a leisure domain, and answering the relevant directives according to how the entrepreneurial player would engage with consumption in the play-space will make the extent of neoliberal structures in the play-space visible.

Identifying the Corruption of Play

The aim of using the previously discussed mapping is to discern how neoliberalism influences play. The analysis in Chapter 5, Chapter 6, and Chapter 7 will reveal the significance of how different elements of play within the AAA video game are changed. A typology can be used in taking the findings from the mapping exercise in order to assess whether play has been corrupted. The typology for assessing whether play has been corrupted will outline what uncorrupted play is, and as the findings are applied to those standards it will be possible to assess the corruption of play in that instance.

Caillois outline’s the formal characteristics of play as ‘(1) free, (2) separate, (3) uncertain, (4) unproductive, (5) regulative, and (6) fictive’ with the last two tending to exclude one another (2001, p. 43). In order to assess the extent of corruption these qualities can be refined to four elements for creating a clear typology for the corruption of play in AAA video games. Two of the formal elements can be eliminated from the typology as they pertain more towards the sort of play the individual is doing

rather than outlining a boundary for what is and is not play. As was mentioned, the final two of Caillois' components, play being regulative or fictive, cancel each other out depending on what sort of play it is. These two formal qualities will hold little relevance in comparison to other formal characteristics that will more directly be affected by the player's circumstance and video game structure. Play should be 'free, separate, uncertain, and unproductive' (Caillois, 2001, p. ix), so if play is those things then it can be considered to be uncorrupted. The criteria for the typology then will be:

- Free: Is the player genuinely free to play as they wish within the confines of the directives that motivate their play?
- Separate: Is play sufficiently separate from the everyday reality of the player both in terms of the nature of the play and access to it?
- Uncertain: Are the outcomes of the play uncertain or is uncertainty of outcomes removed or reduced?
- Unproductive: Is the play unproductive in a sense of producing economic value for the player or external actors?

These four criteria make up the typology to assess the corruption of play. As an example of this typology in use, if the analysis of Chapter 5 is to recognise that the player is not genuinely free to play as they wish in the AAA video game, then the play cannot be considered free. This would mean that the play has been corrupted in this respect. To continue, play could then be determined to be sufficiently separate from everyday reality, the outcomes of play recognised as uncertain, and it could be recognised as an unproductive activity. From these findings it would be determined that play is not free but it is separate, uncertain, and unproductive. Play would be corrupted with regards to the player being able to do what they want but not in respect to the other characteristics of play.

Caillois' attitude towards play and what it achieves is summarised by Motte; 'Play renders null the results it produces, contends Caillois; whereas work and science "capitalize" their outcomes and thereby transform the world' (2009, p. 29). This neatly captures Caillois' notion of play in its ideal form and separate it from other

activity. The notion of capitalising outcomes is reminiscent of the change in the parent-child relationship discussed earlier in the thesis. As Motte notes, play renders null its result because it does not matter, the point of play is the experience of play and assume that nothing will result from it like it would be with showing up to work, performing tasks, and gaining the expected output. Whilst play will share characteristics with other activities in its conduct, it is an activity separate from things like work and labour precisely because of what it should be doing and how it should be conducted. If play cannot null its results, then it is being performed and assessed according to economic criteria and is hence corrupted.

I will highlight that my use of Caillois' criteria for assessing the corruption of play is a playful method in itself, in that it seeks to identify and speculate upon changes within how play is taking place by looking at contemporary instances of play. The typology for assessment I have attached to the identification of corruption of play is designed to give form to this playful speculation. Caillois' work was not designed, or potentially able, to provide a robust methodology for critical analysis, which is why I have developed a typology for the corruption of play to develop ideas within his work. Reviewing Caillois' work, from which my method for identifying the corruption of play is drawn, Hughes states that 'this is a book to be read for ideas, for imaginative hypotheses (not all of which will hold water), for breadth of view of human society' (1962, p. 255). Whilst hardly a criticism, it does highlight the points made in this paragraph. Caillois' work does not provide the robust methodology that I have attached to it. Similar to this, Motte's work highlights a lack of systemic presentation of evidence in Caillois' work as Caillois draws a lot of his observations and conclusions from historical and anthropological sources (2009). This is certainly a valid criticism, but I do not believe it to be a limitation of Caillois' work. The playful nature of Caillois' work is a strength when it comes to theorisation and imagination of inventive analysis of play.

Caillois' work also has its critics in how it reads play that needs to be considered in relation to my approach to assessing the corruption of play. Henricks highlights Ehrmann's work (1971), summarising that his argument as such:

...the oppositions of play and seriousness or play and reality will not work. Play is rarely gratuitous or for nothing; rather, it is a part of the society in which it occurs. Players do not stand apart; they participate in the cultural realities that course through the playground. (2010, p. 177)

This criticism states that the idea of play being separate from everyday life is not a genuine possibility. There will always be some grounding within cultural and social contexts that prevents play from ever being a separate activity. I agree with elements of this assessment as ideology and its structures are inescapable, yet it can still be maintained that in the *ideal play should* be separate. This element of play being related to wider culture and society can be accepted whilst still maintaining that play should at least attempt a separation from everyday reality. Henricks states that Ehrmann's argument is 'unfair' as 'Caillois sought to understand how the separated world of play intersects with social and cultural patterns, which shape play forms and respond to their expressions' (2010, p. 177). Holding up an ideal of play does not prevent engagement with the fact that play will intersect with wider social and cultural phenomena.

Furthermore, Ehrmann's argument states that players rarely play for no reason at all, resisting the idea that play nulls its own outcomes. Again, I agree with some of the sentiment of this argument but the significance of the ideal conduct of play is that it should not be undertaken or judged according to economic criteria. As was discussed in Chapter 2, motivations of play are myriad and personal to the player so there is likely a desired outcome in terms of emotion or gratification. This is not an issue, as it would be if play is linked to notions of productivity in the economic sense. This would constitute a corruption of play and that is what will be identified within this study.

Observations as to whether the play is free, separate, uncertain, and productive will be made based upon the answers to the directive questions. The answers to the questions will indicate the way play is generally structured in AAA video games and what sort of play is enabled. The answers are designed to provide insights that allow

for conceptualisation of how neoliberal ideology is affecting play. Answers to the directives will often be encapsulated in different mechanics in the video game. For example, in Chapter 5 the fast travel mechanic will be used to demonstrate the ways in which uncertainty and unproductiveness are reduced in video games. This can then be used to assess the play in relation to the typology, revealing the potential corruption of play.

Summary of Approach

This chapter has developed the methodological approach that will be used in the following Chapters. Beginning by reviewing previous approaches to video games it was noted how there have been trends towards structure focussed and then player-centric means of studying video games. These trends came about through necessity, as structural focuses helped to develop games studies as an academic discipline before the essential turn towards player-centric focuses which also developed game studies as a discipline.

Whilst the development of both trends was necessary at the current moments in the academic development of studying video game, it has recently become essential to develop hybrid approaches that consider both structure and player agency. Such approaches allow for a more complete conceptualisation of video games and the role they play in society and culture. These can be deemed critical approaches and were identified as the way studies of video games can progress towards. Ruffino's outlining of a 'creative game studies' especially signals the need for inventive and playful ways of studying play to reveal the significance of the medium at the time of writing.

A critical approach was developed for this study that would make use of a cognitive mapping exercise in order to make ideological structures in the play-space (and the player's relationship to them) visible. The aesthetic of cognitive mapping will be applied to the play-space of AAA video games in order to demonstrate that it is a digital space teeming with symbolic and ideological significance. The cognitive mapping exercise will be carried out by establishing the player as the entrepreneurial player, allowing for the discernment of directives that would motivate an

entrepreneurial subject's play. The importance of establishing the player as the entrepreneurial player is to demonstrate that play can be understood and performed according to economic criteria. This is then fostered by the neoliberalism woven into the architecture of AAA video games, that can be identified by the establishment of directives which are made apparent by the formation of and information present in the play-space of AAA video games. It is in relation to this that the collapse of the labour and leisure domains within neoliberal structures becomes especially significant to the methodological approach. As the play-space does not form in a leisure domain and is instead subject to the intensification of work within neoliberal structures the player will carry their entrepreneurial subjectivity into play with them, becoming the entrepreneurial player. From here the directives of play can be discerned. The directives are established by considering how the entrepreneurial player would go through the steps of engaging with the AAA video game. Firstly, the sense of self is formed in relation to the play, then the player exercises their agency, and then the AAA video game provides the player with options for further consumption. These steps are then summed up with the following directives:

- "What can I do?"
- "How efficiently can I do it?"
- "Why am I doing this?"
- "What do I get out of this?"
- "How can I play more?"
- "How can I play better?"

The cognitive mapping exercise will be carried out by answering these directives as the entrepreneurial player, using different elements of the AAA video game as mapping symbols. The work of Bordwell and Light were then discussed to provide a theoretical understanding of how the cognitive mapping would function. Through a consideration of their work it was established how the cognitive mapping exercise will be conducted. It detailed what assumptions are made about how the individual engages with media and how that enables a step-by-step analysis of different components of the play of video games. An assumption is made that neoliberal subjectivities are carried into the play-space by the player which video game

structures will then potentially foster as the AAA format is itself embedded in neoliberal structures.

It was then established that once the mapping exercise has been complete and answers to the directives have been gathered, observations on the nature of the play in AAA video games will be made. These observations will be applied to a typology to assess whether play is corrupted in this instance. The typology for the corruption of play is drawn from the ideal conditions for play as outlined by Caillois. If play fails to meet the criteria of being a free activity, separate from everyday reality, with uncertain outcomes, and is unproductive then it can be corrupted.

To summarise how each of the mapping exercises will proceed in Chapter 5: Identity, Chapter 6: Agency, and Chapter 7: Ideology, the approach will be as follows:

- Outline the theoretical works relevant to the topic

This section will be used to demonstrate a robust understanding of the relevant topic as well as explaining how critical theory can be used to understand this dimension of play in AAA video games. The purpose of this is to demonstrate the links between neoliberalism and an element of the AAA video game format. The establishment of these links will reveal the need for a cognitive mapping exercise in order to better reveal the ideological significance of this element of the AAA video game.

- Identifying neoliberalism in the play-space through cognitive mapping

This section will answer the directive questions detailed in this chapter. Answering these questions can illustrate how the entrepreneurial player is motivated and constrained in their play in different AAA video games. This is the cognitive mapping of the play-space. It will be revealed here why elements of the play-space are ideologically significant and what subjectivities they foster. For example, cognitive mapping of the maps and menus of AAA video games in Chapter 5 reveals the symbolic importance of how information is organised and presented.

- Assessing the corruption of play

The final section will apply the findings from the previous section to the typology for the corruption of play. This will allow the chapter to assess the degree to which play is corrupted by the influence of neoliberal ideology and discussing why it is significant.

Chapter 5: Identity

This is the first of three chapters in which analysis of different components of AAA video games will reveal the corruption of play. The chapter will begin by developing an understanding of identity within neoliberal structures by exploring relevant theoretical literature. The work of Butler (2005), Foucault (1986), and Deleuze (1992) will be used to develop an understanding of how the self is formed and notions of it are constrained by the structures in which they are formed. The work of Bauman (2000) that was discussed in Chapter 3 will be revisited to relate the observations made in the chapter to neoliberal structures, noting how neoliberalism effects notions of the self.

The analysis in this Chapter will take the form of a cognitive mapping exercise that was detailed in Chapter 4. The maps of the video games *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* (2014), *Middle-earth: Shadow of War* (2017), and *Far Cry 4* (2014) and the menus of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018) and *Fallout 4* (2015) will be the objects of analysis. A component of these objects that will be analysed is the fast travel present in many AAA video games. This in-game mechanical feature reveals that the player is motivated to think critically about how they spend their time playing. The cognitive mapping exercise will be done by providing answers to the directives “what can I do?” and “how efficiently can I do it?” by observing how the noted objects of analysis shape play in the AAA video game. Observations will be made on what the player can do and how they are encouraged to do it. This influence on actions is what forms the player’s sense of self within the play-space of the AAA video game.

The observations made from the cognitive mapping exercise will then be used to assess the corruption of play, which will be done using the typology detailed in Chapter 4. The analysis from the cognitive mapping exercise will recognise that the player is not genuinely free to play as they wish, that there is a lack of separation from everyday lived reality, that uncertainty in play is discouraged, and that ultimately play is directed towards productive ends. This suggests that the process of the player engaging with the video game and forming their sense of self in the play-

space contains corrupted play. Manifestations of this form of corrupted play are witnessable in the fast-travel mechanic and the practice of speed-running. The corruption of play here is also signalling the emergence of the endless play offered by AAA video games. In relation to the player forming their sense of self in the play-space, AAA video games serve to reinforce neoliberal subjectivities.

Identity and Neoliberalism

This chapter will discuss certain theoretical positions relating to how individual's form their sense of self and how different spaces are used towards different ends in the formation of one's identity. From here, it can be discussed how neoliberalism impacts these processes, and, in turn, alters the ways the individual comes to understand who they are and how they use different spaces. This is done in order to analyse how the sense of self is formed in the play-space and if neoliberal structures corrupt the process of identity formation through play.

For the video game to satisfy the motivation of the player achieving a meaningful experience, the video game must provide opportunities and a space in which experiences can be gained and pursued. In Chapter 2 it was observed that the video game can provide a space that remedies the instability of everyday reality by providing a set of rules and an avatar upon which to anchor identity and purpose. Part of this remedy relates to the means and processes that contribute towards identity formation. The video game plays a role in the individual's identity formation with the use of the avatar. In *Fallout 4*, for example, the player is tasked with constructing the appearance (facial characteristics, hair colour, build, etc.) and traits (strength, intelligence, charisma, etc.) of their avatar, that is who they then play as. The player can literally construct *who* they are. Other video games will not have character creators but will require the player to, in some degree at least, align with a fixed character. *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* for example contains the protagonist Talion, whom the player cannot alter to any meaningful degree. Here the player cannot construct what their avatar is, but they are given an identity with which to align, the identity formation is not as literal as character creation, but the player is still offered something.

The player forms their identity based upon how they are expected to behave whilst playing, as they recognise their role through the initial engagement with the video game. Both *Fallout 4* and *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor*, in a way similar to many AAA video games, contain menus of information that contain lists of objectives, locations, equipment that player has access to, and more. This information lets the player know what they are capable of and what they should be doing, as well as who they are and what they look like. The individual's sense of self is formed by more than appearance and characteristics, including by circumstances external to the individual that will influence who they are and what they do. This is no different when the self is formed in digital spaces, like the play-space enabled by AAA video games.

The work of Butler and Foucault will be used as it is essential to understanding how the sense of self is formed within contemporary society. Both have been influential in debates on identity and contemporary society due to how their work critically identifies the factors in which individual's come to understand who they are. Butler's work highlights the importance of external factors on the formation of the sense of self. She notes:

...the very terms by which we give an account, by which we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and to others, are not of our making. They are social in character, and they establish social norms, a domain of unfreedom and substitutability within which our "singular" stories are told (2005, p. 21).

The individual's self is in effect determined by their surroundings. The individual's thoughts, beliefs, and practices are significantly affected by prevailing dominant ideologies. To this effect, Butler states 'the "I" does not stand apart from the prevailing matrix of ethical norms and conflicting moral frameworks' (2005, p. 7). As the individual defines themselves it occurs in relation to structures, so even if they are outside of norms their identity is still relative to those norms. From Butler's work one can argue that the sense of self is in a constant state of production through acts of intersubjectivity. Due to this, the formation of the self is not in the complete control of the individual, as it depends on their relations to others and external

structures. Even as the individual gives an account of themselves, the self is being deconstructed by an ongoing series of interactions with things external to the individual. As a result, the self is never fully established, rather it is an ongoing dialogue with the structures in which it operates.

Relating Butler's work to the concept of the entrepreneurial player the individual's engagement with a AAA video game is not intersubjective, rather they engage with a neoliberal object. As I discussed in Chapter 4, such an object suggests that being is defined by characteristics that make it neoliberal in nature and function, serving to reproduce the dominant ideology. The individual then builds their identity through the engagement with an object that will go on to reinforce neoliberal ways of being, inferring that this individual will become more *entrepreneurial* as a result of the process.

Butler approaches the Foucauldian subject, noting that according to Foucault's work on self-construction there is a 'regime of truth [that] offers the terms that make self-recognition possible' (2005, p. 22). This 'regime of truth' is what 'offers a framework for the scene of recognition, delineating who will qualify as a subject of recognition and offering norms for the act of recognition' (Butler, 2005, p. 22). To relate to the previous paragraph, the norms on offer in engaging with the AAA video game are neoliberal ways of being that the subject comes to recognise as how they should be functioning. Foucault outlined the regime of truth in *Discipline and Punish*, stating 'a whole new system of truth and a mass of roles' emerged in relation to the practice of criminal justice (1991, p. 23). Foucault also noted that 'a corpus of knowledge, techniques, 'scientific' discourses is formed and becomes entangled with the practice of the power to punish' (1991, p. 23). Foucault's work details how discipline functions across society, noting how the individual is motivated and constrained to behave in certain ways because of how everything around them functions. Knowledge of how things 'work', how one is supposed to act, the overriding common-sense of society are all part of the regime of truth. This is also reminiscent of the functioning of Fisher's notion of capitalist realism, who observed that neoliberalism represents an environment in which only one set of ideas seems possible (2009). It can be seen how

a pervasive dominant ideology then, or regime of truth, can be a component of how the individual forms their sense of self, as they are forming it within the context of dominant ideological structures. To relate this to play, the AAA video game can potentially be read as operating in the disciplining respect, conditioning the individual to think and operate in a certain way by restricting and constraining their thoughts and actions.

Deleuze develops Foucault's work on discipline to look at how the influence of power operates internally as well as from external sources. Foucault's work notes the functioning of external forces in ordering and disciplining life. For example, the individual moves from their family, to school, to the barracks, and occasionally the hospital or prison. Each of these institutions disciplines the individual and informs what they are. Deleuze summarises Foucault's analysis for what each of these institutions' purposes are, which are 'to concentrate; to distribute in space; to order in time; to compose a productive force within the dimension of space-time whose effect will be greater than the sum of its component forces' (1992, p. 3). Deleuze suggests that these institutions are 'finished' and now the disciplinary society has been replaced by 'societies of control' (1992, p. 4). Deleuze gives a particular example of this, observing that the corporation has replaced the school and the factory, enabling 'perpetual training' over education and rivalry over workers being constituted as a single body (1992, pp. 4-5). Rather than the institution disciplining the individual to behave a certain way, conditions fostered by the institutions encourage the individual to behave in certain ways. The power of the institution operates internally, controlling behaviour rather than disciplining action. Deleuze summarises these changes by stating 'in the disciplinary societies one was always starting again... while in the societies of control one is never finished' (1992, p. 5). I argue that these observations are relevant to the establishment of the cult of work and entrepreneurial subjectivities discussed in Chapter 3. There is always more work to be done in the processes of everyday life and the individual that partakes in this work is a good entrepreneurial subject.

It is the AAA game as a neoliberal object, then, that controls what the player can be rather than disciplinary processes that define their identity. Deleuze matches different forms of machines with different societies as social, cultural, and technological changes occur, noting that the machines of the societies of control are computers (1992, p. 6). I would argue 'the computer' as observed in 1992 can now be read as digital space more broadly. The technologies that allow access to digital spaces are controlling influences in the flow of everyday life. The video game consoles that allow for the playing of AAA video games are part of this structure of control. One of the conclusions of Chapter 1 was that video games enable rather than govern play, suggesting they align with a Deleuzian notion of control rather than a Foucauldian notion of discipline. Domestic play through the technology that allows access to the play-space serves the purpose of further fostering neoliberal subjectivities, controlling notions of the self by motivating and constraining certain forms of behaviour and recognition with the play-space.

Butler highlights elements of Foucault's work on the self, noting that questioning the regime of truth would also be to question oneself, as the self has been formed from engagement with the regime of truth according to Foucault's work (2005, p. 23). Butler in discussing the work of Hegel and Foucault notes that the limits of possibility are defined by the regime of truth (2005, p. 30). She notes that Foucault's positioning of the individual is of being reflexive to the external factors, stating that for Foucault the question we would pose ourselves in relation to identity formation is "what can I become?" (2005, p. 31). The 'can' in this statement of course infers the limitation in what the self could be; the 'can' is what is possible according to the regime of truth or dominant ideological structures. The possibilities and limits of that 'can' are dependent upon the ways the individual can form their sense of self. It stands to reason then that these structures would exert near constant influence on what makes the individual what they are.

In the neoliberal object of the AAA video game it is the entrepreneurial player that is the position from which the entrepreneurial self engages. The individual's behaviours and thoughts as they engage with the video game are controlled by the structures

with which they are engaging. This form of control can be identified with the use of the directives that were detailed in Chapter 4. When it comes to the initial engagement with the video game, as the entrepreneurial player recognises what their role in the video game is they ask “what can I do?” and “how efficiently can I do that?”. This corresponds to how Butler identifies the Foucauldian approach to identity formation articulated in the question “what can I become?”

It was argued in Chapter 2 that video game players play because they are seeking a meaningful experience. This is what AAA video games should be able to provide the player if they are operating ideally. In this respect, the video game’s play-space operates as a form of heterotopic space with regard to its role in identity formation and in allowing the player to seek a meaningful experience. Heterotopic spaces are in effect spaces within spaces, they mirror yet distort the space they are within. Foucault details how the mirror is a heterotopic space:

...in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am (1986, p. 24).

The mirror reflects the space it is within but the space within the mirror is a ‘virtual space’ even if the individual can see themselves within it. Reflecting upon Foucault’s work here it is easy to draw comparisons of the potential ideals of what a video game should be and the sort of play they could enable: the player recognising themselves in their avatar in a virtual space, behind a screen, with the game world functioning as the mirror world. The video game does exist in reality, it is enabled through physical hardware, but behind the screen is another reality or space in which the individual can function and seek meaning. This digital reality does however inform the reality outside of it, as all digital spaces do to physical spaces. The video game here could

allow the individual to 'come back toward' themselves, potentially offering a means of identity formation, for example, in which the individual can re-think themselves.

Foucault observes two forms of heterotopia, those of crisis and those of deviation (1986, pp. 24-25). Heterotopia of crisis are spaces for those who are in crisis in relation to their environment and Foucault gives examples of those in adolescence, old age, or a state of pregnancy (1986, p. 24). It is heterotopic spaces of deviation, however, that are relational to the play-space that comes about through engagement with AAA video games. Heterotopic spaces of deviation are for those 'whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm', effectively those who want to behave outside of established norms (1986, p. 25). Foucault gives the example of a prison as this form of space (1986, p. 25). I would argue that a video game can also be a space of deviation, even if it is not a form of prison. This is because it does provide a space that – ideally – should allow the player to engage in gaming in ways that do not relate to the reality outside the play-space. However, this ideal is not enabled by AAA games that exist within wider contexts of neoliberal structures.

Limitations can appear in the possibilities of deviation from norms within the video game space. Heterotopic spaces are relational to the space they are within (Foucault, 1986, p. 27). Whilst the individual would potentially want to behave in deviation to the norms of the reality outside the video game, they may not be able to. The video game is itself a structure informed by dominant ideological structures, and this is how it functions. As Jurgenson noted, our realities are both digital and physical (Jurgenson, 2011), with each informing the other. The separation of the digital play-space from a lived physical reality is not itself sufficient to move it outside of everyday life. The play-space then is still heterotopic but as a space it experiences limitations due to the pervasive influence of neoliberal ideology. Chun highlights how 'subjects act publicly in private or are 'caught' in public acting privately' (2016, p. 95) in relation to social media and neoliberalism. This inversion highlights how technology is formatted within neoliberal structures. The play of AAA video games can be private but prompts rationalised responses that would be expected in the everyday reality outside of play. Potential deviancy does not mean gaining control whilst the neoliberal formation of

technologies is designed for control rather than enable uncertain or deviant expressions of the self.

Butler asks 'what are these norms, to which my very being is given over, which have power to install me or, indeed, to disinstall me as a recognizable subject'? (2005, p. 23). Various injuries to the self, and abilities to form a sense of self, are done by the pervasive nature of neoliberal ideology and, also, restraints on the possibilities of the way spaces can operate appear. Sennett's work, for example, highlights that flexibilities and uncertainties erode the individual's sense of self in post-Fordist society (1998). This trend is also highlighted by Fisher who states how 'the 'rigidity' of the Fordist production line gave way to a new 'flexibility', a word that will send chills down the spine of every worker today' (2009, p. 33). Flexibility and fluidity are characteristics of neoliberalism that was discussed in Chapter 3, especially in relation to the intensification of work. These conditions of precarity and overwork produce an erosion of the self which is also met with additional demands placed on the individual in relation to how they are supposed to behave and think, namely in economic terms. When things are flexible, the individual finds themselves having to become flexible in order to function as the structures suggest.

Bauman analyses the process of 'individualisation' in society which he notes 'consists of transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' to a 'task' (2000, p. 31). Neoliberalism, as well as informing the means by which we identify in video games, motivates us to seek an identity within a video game as the medium can provide something on which to anchor a sense of self. The responsibility falls to the individual to find their identity within contemporary society; in this way the player of a video game can take means of identification offered to them, but the form of play that is offered by AAA video games will also inform any process of identity formation that takes place. The significance of this is that everything we seek or attempt to imagine in the video game (an identity, play, a meaningful experience, etc.) is constrained and directed by the influence of neoliberalism. Butler highlights Foucault's observation that there is a 'cost' to identity formation within this context, the cost being that knowledge of the self is formed in relation to a set of truths that are 'framed by norms and by specific

modes of rationality' that emerge at certain moments in time (2005, p. 121). It is through this process of identity formation, within neoliberal ideological structures, that an entrepreneurial self constitutes part of the individual's identity. The limitation is that any identity formation that takes place, must take place in this context. The task of identity formation does fall to the individual but the task has limited outcomes. Ultimately, it is a component of neoliberalism that makes identity formation more difficult for the individual.

Bauman notes how 'uncertainty must now be overcome by one's own means; the scarcity of *because-ofs* must be compensated for by home-made *in-order-tos*' (1995, p. 113). Video games can potentially become one of the home-made in-order-tos for the individual to craft part of their identity. The player can play for the opportunity to better understand themselves – the case of the video game *Bloodborne* (2015) helping someone to transition gender and choose a new name discussed in Chapter 2 may be anecdotal, but it demonstrates how engagement with menus in video games assist in identity formation. The information present within the menus allowed for a process of identity formation to take place. Initially, menus would have prompted the player to select physical and personal details before further into the video game the player could equip themselves with different clothing and items. Martinez (the player whose transition was helped by the video game) noted that when playing *Bloodborne* they were 'free to create a character that I would come to see as an extension of my real self' (2019). The video game in this case offers the potential to remedy the insecurity or anxiety surrounding identity, but as discussed, this can be limited by the constraining influence of neoliberalism. In such instances, the 'home-made in-order to' of the AAA video game becomes a device through which to reinforce neoliberal subjectivities. Beyond features like character creation the architecture of the AAA video game also contributes to the formation of identity as the individual will construct their sense of self in relation to what they engage with.

To return to Butler, the individual's ability to create their sense of self is defined in social terms, resulting in the establishment of social norms and the emergence of domains of unfreedom (2005, p. 21). The player recognises their abilities and

acknowledges the limits of possibility in terms of what they can do and how they can go about doing it in the video game when they began to engage with the medium. The process of identity formation is constant, and play will influence it as long as it is being carried out. If this play is corrupted, then, it will serve to reproduce neoliberal subjectivities. The video game can be simultaneously helpful as it was for Martinez playing *Bloodborne* whilst still reproducing neoliberal subjectivities in other aspects of the video game.

Within neoliberal structures it is the activity of the individual that comes to define them. The way in which the reproduction of these neoliberal subjectivities are fostered will be revealed in the next section of the chapter using the cognitive mapping exercise. What I have established by reviewing the theoretical work in this section of the chapter is how the self is formed within the context of neoliberal structures and the extent to which AAA video games are a part of those structures. If it is the activity of the individual that defines them it can be demonstrated in the following section that the AAA video game offers and expects tasks to be completed in a rational and productive manner, fostering the business ontology in the realm of play and in the process making the individual a more neoliberal subject.

Maps and Menus: “What Can I Do?” and “How Efficiently Can I Do It?”

This section will conduct analysis of how the player constructs their identity in the play-space provided by a AAA video game via a cognitive mapping exercise of play-space, answering the directives “what can I do?” and “how efficiently can I do it?” The answers to these questions will allow for a depiction of what sort of play takes place within the play-space. These directives (“what can I do?” and “how efficiently can I do it?”) come about through the clash of what the video game can potentially offer and the way in which neoliberal ideology constrains the possibilities of the medium by fostering entrepreneurial subjectivities.

This part of the analysis will be done through a cognitive mapping exercise. This involves critically reading the information and mechanics that are present in the maps and menus of AAA video games in order to demonstrate how the architecture and

mechanics of the game are constructed. The information that will be analysed includes the display of tasks, objectives, and equipment visible in maps and menus and the fast travel function. The critical reading involves asking why each of these elements is needed and how it enables or motivates what the player is doing. For example, organising information in a certain way may lead the player to prioritise different elements of the video game. This reading is used to answer the discerned directives of play. The answers to these questions reveal (or map) the relationship between the player and their play, and any corruption of that play that may be taking place.

Figures 4 and 5 are images captured from *Far Cry 4* (an open world shooter set in a fictional Himalayan country). Figures 6 and 7 are from *Middle-earth: Shadow of War* and *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* (open world role playing game set in a non-canonical *Lord of the Rings* universe). The world maps (viewable in Figures 4 and 6) signify to the player the many possibilities for play and meaning within the game. Map icons infer that going here will have a purpose, travelling to this destination is worth your time, playing in this area of the map will be productive. The value-obsession of neoliberalism is visible with this construction of the play-space. Supposedly free, separate, uncertain, and unproductive behaviour is made here to make more “sense” in economic terms, with the activity given concrete processes, purposes, and ends. Play is motivated and constrained in ways that attempt to ensure something results from it. For example, in *Far Cry 4* the map will display question mark symbols prior to the player’s arrival in a certain area of the map. The question mark denotes that there is something in that area of the map that will contribute to the player somehow, whether that be the “Mani Wheels” (of which there are 40) that can offer the player experience points that contribute to level progression or “Propaganda Posters” (of which there are 150)³⁹ that can offer the player experience

³⁹ The objective trackers for the Mani Wheels and Propaganda Posters are visible in Figure 5. To relate this to Figure 4, the location of a Mani Wheel, Propaganda Poster, or other collectible are marked on the map by one of the orange question marks until discovered by the player or if the player finds information relating to whereabouts of these items.

points also. There is always something for the player to do and it is rationalised in a way that it offers the player some form of value for their play.

These tasks are what are known as busy-work in the gaming community. Three separate reviews of *Far Cry 4* (ranging from positive and negative) all make note of the tremendous amount of busy-work in the game (Clarkson, 2014) (Walker, 2014) (Hartup, 2014). One of the authors of these reviews states that when busy-work begins the ‘game ceases to be a game’, as the balance between task and reward resembles tedious work tasks (Hartup, 2014). The identification of the nature of these tasks by multiple reviewers demonstrate that this organisation of play generates some sort of issue. I argue that it is evidence of a process of neoliberalisation, demonstrated by how play is organised and directed in a such a way that it becomes a series of tasks designed to produce reward.

Figure 4: A section of the Far Cry 4 world map. Each “?” signals a point of interest, as do the numerous other icons on the map. It is fair to class this map as “information heavy”.

Figure 5: Information and progress of available collectible items in Far Cry 4

In *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* and *Middle-earth: Shadow of War* the player’s avatar is Talion, a Gondorian ranger who sets out on a revenge fantasy after his wife and child are killed. The player’s identification goes beyond these narrative elements, however. The player identifies their role within the game world according to the means of play set up by the world map. It is not just that the player identifying with Talion wants to avenge his family and defeat the antagonist Sauron; they also want to be able to complete the other listed objectives that are marked for them. Figure 7, for example, is a key that explains icons that appear on the game world’s map. Three of the sections are titled “Missions”, “Objectives”, and “Collectibles/Misc.”. One icon is titled “Mission Giver”,⁴⁰ denoting someone who will give the player a

⁴⁰ The specific role of a “Mission Giver” will be analysed in Chapter 6 when non-playable characters are used as objects of analysis in the cognitive mapping exercise.

specific task to carry out if they feel as though they have nothing to work towards. Each of these categories signify something for the player to do. A player asking, “what can I do?” will almost always find an answer, finding tasks that will reward them with something for their completion. Similar to *Far Cry 4*, *Middle-earth: Shadow of War* has both positive and negative reviews that make reference to the large amount of busy-work in the game. One reviewer makes a note that the busywork, even though there is a lot of it, is rewarding (Tassi, 2017). Another review notes an instance of busywork as being ‘annoying, shallow, tedious’ (GameChange, 2020). It is evident then that this organisation of play causes a reaction within the gaming community, even when it is received in a positive way. Some players will not mind or enjoy this organisation of play but still refer to it as busy-work. I argue that the acceptance of such an organisation of play into gaming signals a process of neoliberalisation within the play-spaces of the AAA video game format.

What is then significant about the maps of these noted video games is how they focus the time in the play-space towards marked objectives, directing what the player will be doing as they play. As with the *Far Cry 4* map, the icons on the world map for *Middle-earth: Shadow of War* indicate where play is productive, where the player’s time can be spent to result in something rather than just have been time playing.

Figure 6: A section of the Middle-earth: Shadow of War world map

Figure 7: Icon legend for Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor

The organisation in such a way emphasises rationality of action and value in play. The player should be moving towards something of note or gathering something of note. Bauman writes about the concept of ‘value-rational’, an idea developed by Weber in which value is pursued for its own sake (Weber, 1947 cited in Bauman, 2000, p. 60). Neoliberalism is ‘value-obsessed’ rather than value-rational in the Weberian sense (Bauman, 2000, p. 61). Bauman’s use of ‘obsessed’ rather than ‘rational’ highlights the drive towards value in spite of other rationalising influence. To refer back to the

Fiverr advert in Figure 2, sleep deprivation and exhaustion are no barriers to the pursuit of economic returns. That is obsession. It is not rational to work yourself to ill-health but if you are obsessed with the return then you will. The play studied in the previous paragraphs fosters this obsession of value by alerting the player to the possibility of more returns and more that can be gathered and found. The player recognises themselves as someone who should be doing as the possibility to do it is there.

Bauman notes that 'most of human life and most of human lives will be spent agonizing about the choice of goals...The question 'What can I do?' has come to dominate action' (2000, p. 61). To be value-obsessed is to think of all thought and action in terms of value generated from those thoughts and actions. This way of thinking intensifies along with the expansion of the economic sphere into other spheres under a dominant neoliberal ideology that we have observed in the collapse of separate leisure and labour domains. This form of value-obsession is evident within video games; the question of 'what can I do?', as Bauman stated, dominates action and as such will likely be the very first thing that the entrepreneurial player asks of a video game. Engagement with maps and menus is often the initial means of beginning to play and how the player establishes what their role is in relation to the video game. Given how the analysed maps organise play, the player realises their role as the person to extract the symbolic value from the video game using their play as the means of extraction. From there players can also seek further value by utilising mechanics and information to derive more value from their play.

Bauman describes how extracting meaning from things is increasingly up to the individual:

Living in a world full of opportunities – each one more appetizing and alluring than the previous one, each 'compensating for the last, and providing grounds for shifting towards the next' – is an exhilarating experience. In such a world, little is predetermined, even less irrevocable.... For the possibilities to remain infinite, none may be allowed to petrify into everlasting reality (2000, p. 62).

As is the physical neoliberal reality, the digital world of the game is rife with opportunity (albeit the access to that opportunity in the physical world is limited by various personal and external factors). Information heavy maps, like those of figures [4](#), within AAA video games detail a world full of opportunity, clearly marked for the player to pursue. The question of “what can I do?” dominates and motivates play, there always needs to be something else to engage with and something else to do. Here, the earlier mentioned concept of endless play can be demonstrated. Endless play comes about due to the collapse of labour and leisure domains, the unbinding of play from leisure allows play to be understood in economic terms. This assessment of play means it does not have to end. If there can be economic justification for an activity within neoliberal structures then it can be carried out as long as it can be economically justified. For example, in *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* “quests” will be continually generated for the player. These are tasks for the player that the video game will continually generate and display on the player’s map in some way. The game will generate these quests (and their subsequent rewards) infinitely, aiming to give structure and purpose towards the player’s play. The player could also just continue to play in the game world, but the game will continue to dispense marked lists and locations for the player instead. One review of *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* makes a note of these procedurally generated tasks and the potential for them to turn the game into a ‘grind’, referring to the game itself as ‘The Neverending Story’ (Halliday, 2018). The review goes on to note that such tasks can add a significant amount of playing hours to the video game. As with the noted reviews of *Far Cry 4* and *Middle-earth: Shadow of War*, there is a consensus from the gaming community that AAA video games provide ample tasks and information to the player. The endless possibilities of play have to offer endless value to the player. Based on this, I would argue that generally the AAA video game appears more concerned with offering as many tasks to the player as possible rather than prioritising the ability to ensure an ideal space for play. This is evidence of a neoliberalisation of the play-space, the ability to carry out as many tasks as possible whilst playing is a central idea to the development of many AAA video games.

The maps of AAA video games, heavy with information, contribute to creating a play-space in which the player always has something to do and something to work towards. Even completing the narrative of a video game need not be the end of the play offered, with many titles offering different difficulty settings, achievements⁴¹ that require secondary tasks to be completed, or what is known as new game+ where the player can start again but with a new set of challenges and equipment. The player is motivated to pursue value in their play as there will always be play to be performed towards a certain end.

Once the entrepreneurial player receives answers to the question “what can I do?” through their engagement with maps they can then ask “how efficiently can I do it?” They are instructed to pursue value but how value can be most efficiently pursued and amplified would be the next logical step for the entrepreneurial player. Optimisation of play in AAA video games is something that players are directed towards. Equipment within video games having different properties or stats is not a new phenomenon but the form they take in AAA video games is influenced by the value-obsession of neoliberalism. The stat and data heavy appearance of inventory menus in video games pictured in Figures 8, 9, 10, and 11 (*Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* and *Fallout 4*) demonstrate the way in which the efficiency of digital objects is emphasised to the player. Information will indicate the attributes of specific pieces of equipment and compare them to other pieces, letting the player know if one specific piece will improve them somehow. For example, one piece of armour may have higher damage resistance than another.

Figures 8 and 9 show the information the player can see in *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* relating to their avatar’s stats (like total health, armour value, and damage output from equipped weaponry). The more well-equipped the avatar is, the better set they are to pursue value in the game world. One can see this in figures 10 and 11 in the *Fallout 4* inventory menus where the plus and minus symbols indicate better or worse values. The player is encouraged to assess the way they are playing given the

⁴¹ Achievements were a gameplay element discussed in Chapter 1 . They are digital trophies attained for achieving certain objectives.

efficiency of equipment they have, and whether they could be more efficient if they were to equip and play in a different way. The player can also enter these menus at a moment's notice, constantly having the option to temporally disrupt their presence in the play-space in order to more efficiently organise their avatar's equipment or stats. The integrity of the play-space comes second to the ability to more efficiently operate within it. Video games like *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* and *Fallout 4* will have dozens of articles or forum posts devoted to determining the best equipment for the avatar (Birnbaum, 2018) (Deruyter, 2019). The existence of such guides infers that the player can better prepare their activity when they begin playing. I argue that this is an indication of the neoliberalisation of play in AAA video games as the player is encouraged to rationalise and optimise their play.

Figure 8: Inventory Menu in Assassin's Creed Odyssey

Figure 9: Inventory menu of weaponry in Assassin's Creed Odyssey showing detailed information and statistics on one specific piece of equipment

Figure 10: Inventory menu in Fallout 4 showing armour and statistics and information for a specific piece of armour

Figure 11: Inventory menu in Fallout 4 showing weaponry and statistics and information for a specific weapon

Figure 12: A section of the player's view of the map from Fallout 4

Figure 13: A section of the player's view of the world map from Fallout 4. The outlined icons indicate a place of interest that the player is yet to visit

To summarise the mapping of the play-space, the player is encouraged and motivated to work towards clearly defined and marked objectives in AAA video games. In the pursuit of these objectives and goals the player is also encouraged to be as efficient as possible in terms of how they pursue these objectives. When the entrepreneurial player asks “what can I do?” they are met with maps and menus that contain a host of information, pointing the player towards different tasks, what can be done and what needs to be done to complete it as well as where they need to go. When the entrepreneurial player asks “how efficiently can I do it?”, after receiving answers to the previous question, the AAA video game provides information and mechanics that enable the player to value efficiency above uncertainty. This allows them to reduce the chances of them failing to meet their objectives and simply complete their objectives in a more efficient manner. Entrepreneurial subjectivities are fostered outside of play, and the play-space of AAA video games serves to reinforce those subjectivities. The cognitive mapping exercise can image the methods of the player forming their identity within the AAA video game as a space that:

- Prioritises set objectives over unstructured play by attracting the player’s attention towards marked objectives.
- Encourages the player to pursue these objectives with symbolic rewards, giving the player something to play *towards* rather than just playing.
- Encourages the player to pursue these objectives in an efficient manner by offering different mechanics that enable temporal disruption (like frequently entering menus to change equipment and the fast travel mechanic).

The means of engagement in the play-space of AAA video games through which the player constructs their identity in the play-space is one that is set up to appease entrepreneurial subjectivities and enable the entrepreneurial player.

The Corruption of Play

This part will take the analysis of the previous section to assess the extent to which play is corrupted. To reemphasise the criteria to assess the corruption of play; separation refers to the player's time and conditions of playing being sufficiently distinct from their everyday reality; play being "free" involves the player being genuinely unconstrained to play as they want within their play-space; uncertainty requires that the player does not know the outcome of their play prior to playing; unproductiveness as a trait of play requires that nothing of economic value come about as a result of the player's play. These formal characteristics constitute play in its ideal form: play should be separate, free, uncertain, and unproductive.

From the analysis in the previous section it was determined that the player's attention is directed towards clearly marked objectives. Having their attention drawn towards these objectives on the map is how the video game answers the "what can I do?" question the entrepreneurial player asks of the video game. The form of play that this encourages is often referred to as "open world busy-work" within gaming communities. Open world busy-work, as a phrase, encompasses the sorts of tasks that involve obsessive collection of items for the purpose of a reward. For example, the noted collection of Propaganda Posters in *Far Cry 4* would be open world busy-work. It is also telling that phrases like 'busy-work' and 'grind' have appeared in the gaming community to describe this particular way of playing AAA video games (Gault, 2017) (Riley, 2015) (Bailey, 2017) as it infers that what the player is doing is not easily recognisable as play and categorisations that usually refer to work fit better. This is due to the laborious nature of the tasks and the player's compulsion to complete it out of a sense of duty towards working towards an end rather than having a meaningful experience. What the typical map of the AAA video game represents is the endless possibilities of valuable play, the numerous icons represent that playing here will be worth your time, that there will be something here for you that ensures that coming here is a rational choice and a valuable way to spend your time. From this, I would argue that play is not unproductive, as the player is moved towards productive ways of playing, as their play results in symbolic reward and as it is guided

by fairly regimented ways of what should be done. The means of engagement with the AAA video game make it clear that the player's play should result in something and not be unproductive.

This drive towards productivity within play is reflected in the idea of video games having an amount of time they can offer the player. It has been highlighted that AAA video games now perceived to offer around 60 hours of play rather than the 5 or 10 hours that would have been likely in the past, for example *Assassin's Creed Unity* (2014) takes around 16 hours to complete the main story objectives but will take around 78 hours of play to complete all the other objectives (Brown, 2019). Brown notes their own experience playing *Far Cry 4* and the nature of attempting to complete all of the tasks displayed on the map. They state that the use of map icons (as I have discussed in the previous section) to display that something is present on it is 'devious' but 'effective' as it creates a compulsion to see what is there and to take further steps towards completing the game (Brown, 2019). Brown also adds that this process is 'not fun, in and of itself' and the form of satisfaction gained from it is akin to smoking (2019). This compulsion that Brown describes is the fostering of neoliberal subjectivity. It is not fun but it must be done as it leads to some form of reward or ability to claim that you have done something with your activity. This compulsion to be productive is present in multiple areas of life already and the structures of AAA video games mean that in play this compulsion can still be satisfied, grounding the AAA video game firmly in neoliberal structures.

The information presented in menus that detail the avatar's health, damage output, and other similar traits encourage the player to improve them in order to make their play more efficient. Means of increasing this efficiency are often spelled out for the player, as some AAA video games will signal when a different piece of equipment will make the avatar more efficient. The underlying significance of this sort of organisation of the play-space is that it reduces uncertainty and emphasises the idea of play producing something. Similarly, the player may not be free to play how they generally wish, they may prefer inefficient in-game equipment for aesthetic or

sentimental reasons, but they would be motivated to equip their avatar in an efficient manner.

The organisation of information in AAA video games (typified in the formation of maps and menus) fosters a neoliberal subjectivity.

Fast Travel and Speed-Running

This section explores three components of AAA video games, the fast travel mechanic, the speeding-running phenomena, and the permadeath mechanic. The purpose of this is to elaborate upon how the corruption of play manifests within play-spaces, what the consequences of these manifestations are, and if they can be resisted.

The fast travel mechanic encourages the player to disrupt their play in order to be more efficient in what they are working towards. The mechanic itself is indication that neoliberal approaches to action are evident in AAA video games. This thesis then argues that the menus and mechanics of AAA video games enable a form of play that is not sufficiently separate from the player's everyday reality, where the player is potentially not free to play as they wish, where uncertainty is continually reduced through temporal manipulation of the play-space, and that play is directed towards productive ends rather than sustaining the player's presence in the play-space. This level of corruption encourages ways of playing for the entrepreneurial player that values play that privileges productivity and efficiency above the formal characteristics of ideal play. This manifests in the previously discussed analysis as the player seeks to collect objectives that demonstrate their progress or engage in busy-work that produces a visible outcome.

From the work of Bordwell (1985) we can observe that the viewer of a Hollywood film has a certain expectation about the way the film will unfold depending on its genre and other such characteristics. I argue that the same can be said of the player of a AAA video game, there are certain conventions and attitudes that pre-exist in the player due to ideological conditioning outside of their time playing that are then

further reinforced by how their play unfolds. Fast travel is one such instance of our ideological biases being confirmed by the way the AAA video game structures play and directs engagement with the play-space.

Fast travel allows the player to travel relatively instantaneously in the game world between two discovered locations by selecting them in their map menu. Fast travel usually involves the player pausing the game in order to view the map, from there the player would select a location they want to travel to. Once a location has been selected a loading screen will appear and once the loading has finished the player's avatar will appear in the selected location. This eliminates the need for the player's avatar to literally (as in walk, run, or drive, etc.) travel to a location. The fast travel feature is ubiquitous within AAA video games and reflects the value obsession of neoliberalism. Fast travel carries with it an inference that one's time playing could be more productive. Fast travel reduces the game world to points of interests where play is deemed to be productive, compressing space-time in accordance with the market ethic of neoliberal ideology. It is similar to Crary's work which highlights the deterioration of sleep in neoliberal structures. Crary noted that sleep is an 'uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism' (2014, p. 10). Play should be the same thing, yet the technology that enables it discourages play if it is not producing something. If the player's avatar inhabits part of the game world with no symbolic return then this is not useful play to the entrepreneurial player. The entrepreneurial player can instead make use of a mechanic that the video game provides which relatively instantaneously takes them to a location where they can be productive. Sleep is treated with the same disdain in neoliberal structures, the individual may be encouraged to drink coffee or an energy drink so they do not have to rest and continue to work.

The useless space serves the purpose of being a promise of possibilities to the player, but the fast travel mechanic is there for them to avoid this space as there is likely nothing there that will advance their status and progress within the game. When the player uses the fast travel mechanic they are effectively taken out of the play-space as they temporally disrupt what they were doing, teleporting their avatar from one

location to another with menu commands. Areas of a game world become productive and non-productive, and the mechanics infer that the player should disrupt their presence in the play-space in order to move to a location that can potentially offer something in return for playing there. This is also indicative of the wider transformation of space in an era of digital communications and global networks. The useless space needs to be there to present the possibility of play but in terms of efficiency and productiveness it is dead space to be eliminated to perform productive actions. It is yet another manifestation of the culture of immediacy (2007) (a concept that will be developed in Chapter 7), exemplified by things like next and same day delivery. This concept of time being pivotal to play within AAA video games will be explored further in Chapter 7 when discussing the purpose of consuming microtransactions made available by AAA video games.

To better understand the fast travel mechanic, it is vital to observe the relationality it creates between the player and their play. As noted in the previous paragraph, the player can take themselves out of play temporarily in order to move to somewhere the play is more productive. Their play can be disrupted if it moves towards productive ends. Virilio noted in relation to the World Wide Web and the globalisation of location, 'WHERE loses its priority to WHEN and HOW' (1995, p. 155). Referring to Figures 4 and 6, the locations marked by some sort of icon are where the player should be in order to be productive and the time spent away from these areas is not productive. It does matter *where* they are and *when* and *how* the player gets there, as time spent elsewhere in the game world without symbolic reward is inferred to be wasted time. Figures 12 and 13 can likewise be used to illustrate this with the additional note that areas of interest are marked by an outline. This draws the player's attention to specific locations on a map and informs them that travelling here would mean at least some reward⁴² or an event. The player is actively encouraged to disrupt the play-space using the fast travel mechanic in order to get to somewhere that are visible returns.

⁴² Players receive experience points upon the discovery of a location in *Fallout 4*. This means that the discovery of each location offers the player something in return for arriving there.

To consider the map of *Fallout 4* in figures 12 and 13, the player is shown the relative locations of points of interest within the game world and given the ability to jump between them, negating the space between points of interest. It should be asked “why does the player fast travel rather than walk with their avatar?” and I believe the answer lies in the neoliberal fetishisation of productivity, as the player looks to decrease their time carrying out a seemingly unproductive activity. The ideological schemata that the player maps onto the game is enabled by the mechanics that are within the video, like the fast travel system. The entrepreneurial player needs to justify their time in the play-space, ensuring that it yields a productive return, and running their avatar between points A and B would be a waste of time that could be spent playing productively when the space between A and B can be bypassed completely with a fast travel mechanic. The player of *Fallout 4* upon entering the game world already sees the space between objectives or points of interest as dead space, with the fast travel mechanic reinforces this notion of valuable and dead space within play.

Ultimately, the fast travel mechanic exists to save time. As noted, the entrepreneurial player of *Fallout 4* (or any other AAA video game with the mechanic) would make use of the fast travel mechanic to move between point A and B. As how the walkthrough method (2018) reveals the intended use of an app by “walking through” the steps of app usage, to walkthrough the mechanics on offer in figures 12 and 13 there is a time saving imperative and a preference placed upon perceived productive areas of play. This draws out this mechanic so it can be analysed, and the mechanic demonstrates when thinking about *why* this course of action is taken it is evident it is to do with time, even assuming that it is done so the player can find more enjoyable areas of play to play in then we have to question why that enjoyment appears at points A and B and not the process of travelling between points A and B. Play being directed in this way indicates that the enjoyment of play is to be found in its ability to produce a sense a visible outcomes rather than engaging with the game world itself, as the game steers the player towards removing themselves temporally from the game world and play-space in order to be re-entered at a different location that can produce more productive outcomes, more quickly.

Another interesting manifestation of this corrupted play is the popularity of speed-running AAA video games. For example, a website that logs different speed-runs has recorded 1,086,317 speed-run attempts at the time of writing in 2020 (Speedrun.com, 2020). Speed-running involves the player attempting to complete the game as quickly as possible (each attempt is called a 'run') and is popular generally but there are certain video games with a community of speed-runners around it. For example, the *Dark Souls* series has a large, active speed-running community. This is not to say that neoliberal ideology is responsible for speed-running but, this thesis argues, its prevalence in current gaming communities has been enabled by the neoliberal corruption of play. As noted, it has become especially popular in the *Dark Souls* series and *Bloodborne* game⁴³, it even has a wiki-style website (SpeedSouls, 2019) that details current records and offers advice on how to speed-run the games.

In an article that attempts to explain the popularity and motivation behind speed-running, Urquhart states that to play games quickly is the best way to play (Urquhart, 2019). Urquhart makes the assertion that all video game narrative components are 'almost always terrible' and that games only require gameplay to be great, so attempting to beat the game as quickly as possible makes sense as a method to play (Urquhart, 2019). This harkens back to the claims of the early ludologists within game studies and the perceived antagonism between ludic and narrative elements of video games. The assertion of Urquhart is reinforced by a popular technique of speed-runners to set the language of the video games they play to Japanese even if they do not speak or understand the language. This is done because narrative segments or conversations with non-playable characters are often shorter and quicker when in Japanese and not English. An example of this is Japanese dialogue boxes in the game *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) being significantly faster generating than English dialogue boxes (FunnyAnimatorJimTV, 2017), saving speed-runners valuable seconds but highlighting that narrative components and other elements of play are trivial.

⁴³ Often shortened to "Soulsborne" as they are both developed by FromSoftware.

The popularity of speed-running demonstrates the pervasiveness of neoliberal forms of engagement with AAA video games, even when it might not be the intent of developers. The player finds a role within the video game through which they can be productive even if that is not what the video game is for. For example, *Dark Souls* games are not made to be speed-run but it has become a popular way of playing the video games. The director of the *Dark Souls* series, Hidetaka Miyazaki, stated that he did not expect players of the game to do speed-runs, adding that this seemed to be one of the 'strange new ways to play the games' (Kamen, 2016). A speed-running website states that 'people speedrun to challenge themselves, to see a game pushed to the limits, and to get extra replay value out of a game' (SpeedRunsLive, 2019). Speed-running as a form of play can enable and motivate value obsessiveness in a similar manner to that of achievement or trophy hunting, which was discussed in Chapter 2. At the core of this motivation of play is a desire to extract something of value from the playing of a video game. As was mentioned earlier in relation to the fast travel mechanic, Virilio notes how 'where' loses priority to 'when' and 'how', play also loses its priority within the game to a 'when' and 'how' (1995, p. 155). It is not just that where has lost priority but also *what*, what the individual is doing is also de-prioritised in relation to when that action produces a result and how that action goes about produces a result. Additionally, speed-running can become one of the home made 'in-order-tos' noted by Bauman (1995, p. 113). A player that can view themselves as a good speed-runner has not just played for the sake of playing, they have managed to produce something from their play that adds symbolic value to their own identity.

However, speed-running could also be a very uncertain way of playing, and hence not a corrupted form of play in this respect. The player attempting this form of play will not know what their outcome will be, they could falter and produce a slower speed-run, or they could succeed and produce a quicker speed-run. In this sense, their play is uncertain and hence adheres to at least one of the formal characteristics of play. Despite this possibility, avid speed-runners will often go to great lengths to reduce any uncertainty on their speed-run by finding efficiency and low error routes to reduce uncertainty in their run. For example, figure 14 is a common form of display

that speed-runners will use to track their attempts at finishing a run. Information within these sort of displays updates how long the run is taking, how quickly each segment of the video game was completed and whether they are running at a quicker pace than their previous best attempt. Figure 14 shows how much time a speed-runner is losing and gaining as they play the video game. The information present will even let the player know if the speed-run itself will be likely or not to be a record or personal best. Speed-runners seek to have as quick a time as possible and will use multiple techniques to achieve this. These time saving techniques often come down to saving seconds or fractions of a second. For example, Dark Souls speed-runners have techniques that can cancel avatar animations or even manipulate menus so items can be equipped faster for us (Speed Souls, 2020).

Figure 14: Figure 14: A screenshot from a former world record run of the video game Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice (2019)

If, however, uncertainty is the motivating factor behind this element of play, then it could be a location of resistance against neoliberal corruption of play that is present in the intentionality of the AAA video game's very structures.

It was noted in Chapter 4 that it is possible for the player to resist neoliberal ideology in play, but only if they are afforded the opportunity to do so by video game structures. There is visible pushback in the medium of AAA video games to what can be recognised as neoliberal forms of play as well as players finding inventive ways to play video games (like speed-running). By noting this pushback, elements of play that are not, or at least not completely, corrupted by neoliberal ideology in AAA video games can be observed.

The appearance of 'permadeath' mechanics in some AAA video games is one potential site of opposition to the presence of neoliberal ideology across the medium. Permadeath is a mechanic utilised by some video games. When this mechanic is used, if a player's avatar dies in the game world (by reaching 0 health for example) they are considered dead and cannot be used by the player anymore. Depending on the video

game the player would potentially have to use a different avatar or start the game over. Hanson notes how designers that use mechanics like permadeath are ‘actively resisting methods of temporal manipulation that have effectively become standard features of many digital games’ (2018, p. 103). Different forms of this mechanic are exhibited in AAA titles like *Doom* (2016)⁴⁴ which contains a difficulty setting called “Ultra Nightmare”; if the player’s avatar dies on this setting then the play through ends and the player returns to the start of the game. It would not matter if they have saved before the event of the avatar’s death. In the *X-COM* series⁴⁵ when the player loses one of their soldiers in combat that soldier is gone for good and cannot be used again, for example in *XCOM 2* (2016) when a squad member is killed in combat, they leave nothing but a memorial at the player’s base in the game world. The significance of something like permadeath as a mechanic is that it works counter to neoliberal forms of play. It is a permanence and stability that is at odds with the flexibility and unpredictability of life in contemporary society. The logic of permadeath appears a brutal one that seems to fit with the dog eat dog nature of neoliberal capitalism, but the play operating with this as a feature undermines imperatives towards productivity and efficiency. It counters the promise of there always being something else for the player, for the chance to be productive again. As Bauman stated ‘in such a world, little is predetermined, even less irrevocable. Few defeats are final, few if any mishaps irreversible; yet no victory is ultimate either’ (2000, p. 62). Permadeath can potentially eliminate the value obsession within play in AAA video games; the play would matter in a different way to the player knowing that failing to beat the game would truly mean so and winning would be more ‘ultimate’.

This sort of risk also better separates the play-space from the everyday reality of the player, the threat of life and death hanging over their avatar better grounds the player in the play-space. On the surface the permadeath mechanic appears to clash with play ideally needing to be uncertain, as final death is certain. I would argue that it is less certain than the knowledge that the avatar will always reanimate and is a

⁴⁴ A first-person shooter in which the player combats demons.

⁴⁵ These video games are mostly turn-based strategy games in which the player commands a unit of soldiers fighting against an alien invasion.

less neoliberal way of constructing death in play. It is more neoliberal to reanimate a corpse so it can continue to undertake activity than to let it rest. Death is another natural barrier to activity and the stakes of a final death will also do more to ground the player within the play-space itself, better separating time playing from everyday reality.

The permadeath mechanic subverts an expectation of the entrepreneurial player, it can shatter visible markers of productivity. The player of *X-COM 2* could spend a lot of time and care in ensuring the improvement and levelling up of one of their avatars only for them to be killed in combat, removing all of that previous work. This mechanic, whilst rejecting preconceived neoliberal notions of the value of work, operates counter to the way the fast travel mechanic does in directing play. It fosters uncertainty rather than fetishising productivity. The entrepreneurial player of a AAA video game can experience death as an impracticality that temporally stalls accumulation of progress and experience, for example on *Fallout 4* the player would load up at the previous save point ready to resume activity, yet the player of *X-COM 2* that experiences one of their soldiers dying in combat is now without their soldier, the action has a thorough consequence with little concern for the productivity demonstrated by that character's progression prior to their death.

Another potential site of resistance that serves to better ground the player in the play-space can be found in the absence of a map and a pause button in the *Dark Souls* series. The absence of a map confuses the directives of "what can I do?" and "how efficiently can I do it?" in that the player cannot know for sure which areas of the game world will yield productive play. The player must play their way around, looking for areas of significance themselves. This exploration will not always be productive or efficient way to spend time within the game but that's how it functions. Similarly, the absence of a pause button grounds the player in the game world and prevents them from thinking about the directive of how efficient they can be in every moment of play. Huizinga's notion of the 'magic circle' denotes the altered state where the player enters the spirit of play (1949, pp. 10-11). As Hanson notes, the magic circle is 'fragile' and the player's decision to interrupt play does 'break' the circle (2018, pp.

56-57). Huizinga's magic circle can be thought of in terms of play being sufficiently separate when thinking about Caillois' formal characteristics of play (2001, p. 43). On the surface, not being able to take pause whilst playing could potentially be impractical to the player but it is a step to ensure that play is sufficiently separate from everyday reality. The absence of information and mechanics likewise makes the play more uncertain and the player is better situated to play as they want. The absence of a pause button and map in *Dark Souls* (2011) then encourages play that is separate, free, uncertain, and unproductive.

Hanson notes that 'pausing and resuming a game, while common practice in contemporary video games, effects an idiosyncratic ramification for the function of time within the video game' (2018, p. 82). This can be viewed in a positive sense; Hanson identifies the agency this gives the player over the experience within the video game but that it can also fundamentally alter the gameplay experience (2018, pp. 82-83). If the player of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* or *Fallout 4* wanted to access the menus in figures 8, 9, 10, and 11 then the game would pause whilst they do so, regardless of the avatar's situation in the game world. The pause menus are also only one input command away on the player's controller. To think about equipping a more efficient piece of armour or weapon in a situation (potentially in the middle of combat) serves to break the player's presence in the play space (or rather breaks the magic circle). Additionally, the player could be pausing the game to make use of the multiple number of guides, mentioned earlier in the chapter, that are often readily available for AAA video games. The *Dark Souls* series does have stat and information heavy inventory menus, but due to the avatar's presence in the game world to access these menus whilst playing would be dangerous to the avatar, as accessing them does not pause the video game. If the player accesses their inventory menu the game world would still carry on around them, even if their avatar is in combat.

The way time and space operate in the *Dark Souls* series and video games that deploy similar mechanics relates to Mitchell's ideas of controlling the digital space and different forms of play. Mitchell highlights that video games offer the player 'control over clearly comprehensible worlds' and help to 'inculcate a desire for mastery over

them' (2018, p. 12). Mastery of the world is achieved by a player forming a relationship to the game rules. Mitchell goes on to state that 'modern technology tends towards the defiance of death through the exercise of control' (Mitchell, 2018, p. 14) after discussing the significance of time-keeping and the progress of time being a threat to stability and security. I argue that mechanics like permadeath and the absence of maps and pause features in video games are tools for the player to exercise an *actually* effective control and satisfy desires of mastery of game rules. These mechanics enable the player to be grounded within their play-space, effectively pulling up the ladder behind the player when they enter the play-space. A seeming absence of control is in fact a push towards gaining a more thorough control of the play-space without further spatial or temporal disruption.

It was discussed in Chapter 4 that Hanson views Bordwell's work in order to identify the player of a video game as the principle causal agent (2018, p. 82). What was drawn from this is that the player is able to pause the game (removing themselves from the play-space) and can then ponder their actions which leads to alterations in outcomes within the game world. In this respect, pausing allows time allocation for the directives of "what can I do?" and "how efficiently can I do it?" to be addressed, altering the play, reducing separation from everyday reality and reducing the uncertainty of outcomes, as the player seeks to make their play more productive in terms of what it returns. Pausing could be motivated by the player's fear of failure or even inefficiency in this respect, as failing in a section of a video game would result in a setback for them. Hanson does go on to discuss how saving the game⁴⁶ has a similar effect, noting the player can fully explore the possibilities of the game world before reloading the game to the moment of saving (2018, p. 83). Even this, however, feeds into the idea of trying to play efficiently, with uncertainty being treated as an inconvenience rather than a characteristic of play.

The entrepreneurial player especially would make use of the pause and save function to rationalise their actions, processing what the most efficient form of their play is.

⁴⁶ Saving involves digitally preserving the current state of the video game so that that exact state can be returned to if the player chooses to, even after moving beyond that point.

As noted earlier, Hanson observed that temporal manipulation is commonplace in many modern video games (2018, p. 103) and this thesis argues that it is neoliberal ideology (in the form of assessing and conducting thought and action according to economic criteria) that explains this phenomenon. The absence of a pause command or easily accessible save feature would ground the player in the play-space, better separating them from their everyday reality and ensuring uncertainty remains a feature of play. This, however, does not fit with the discussed trend of temporal manipulation in modern video games. Mechanics like permadeath in *XCOM 2* and the absence of pausing in the *Dark Souls* series are not as commonplace as the open world busy-work, grind, and rationalised environments in many AAA video games. Two of the video games that were the focus of early analysis, for example, *Fallout 4* and *Far Cry 4*, can be readily paused and allow for the player to change conditions with relative ease, enabling the player to reduce uncertainty and ensure their play produces a desired outcome.

To summarise, looking at the play surrounding the means of identity construction within the AAA video game, play is corrupted frequently. The player through seeking possibilities within their play (asking “what can I do?”) is motivated to focus on productive, predictable, and identifiable goals and objectives that will result from their play. As they receive answers and carry out this play, the entrepreneurial player, asking “how efficiently can I do it?” is provided with mechanics and contextual information that enables rationalisation of their play. In terms of general assessment:

- Separate: The player’s play at times is not sufficiently separate from their everyday reality. The rationalising influence of neoliberalism motivates the player to disrupt the temporality of the play-space in order to make their play more efficient. The influence of neoliberal ideology also restricts the video game’s ability to provide a space that is sufficiently separate.
- Free: The player is often free to play how they wish but they are motivated to pursue marked objectives and to be as efficient as possible in terms of what their avatar is capable of (equipment) and how quickly they can do their play (fast travel). The player is motivated to corrupt their own play in a way in

order to make it more efficient, the option is there to play as they wish but it may result in not advancing the video game.

- Uncertain: Play is relatively uncertain even with the information heavy maps and menus of AAA video games, but the player is again motivated to reduce this uncertainty through disrupting the play-space with frequent pausing in order to make what they are doing more efficient. Uncertainty, despite being a characteristic of play, is made to seem undesirable.
- Unproductive: Play is corrupted due to the heavy emphasis on the player spending their time playing working towards something productive (as in produces a visible or symbolically rewarding outcome). Whilst the player is technically free to play counter to the video games intentionality there is a heavy emphasis on pursuing objectives and goals that result in visible returns.

Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to analyse how the player constructs their identity in the play-space in order to reveal how neoliberal ideology corrupts this aspect of play. The chapter first established that notions of the self are in constant construction through interaction with forces external to the individual. It was also established that the video game should ideally operate as a heterotopic space of deviancy, in which the player can subvert expectations placed on them by reality outside of the play-space. However, the video game as a neoliberal object functions to control the player's thoughts and actions, reproducing the entrepreneurial subjectivities that are fostered by neoliberal structures.

The next section of the chapter was a cognitive mapping exercise of an element of the play-space through which the player forms their identity in the play-space by recognising their role in the video game. The maps of the video games *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor*, *Middle-earth: Shadow of War*, and *Far Cry 4* and the menus of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* and *Fallout 4* were the objects of analysis. By critically reading these objects answers to the directives "what can I do?" and "how efficiently can I do it?" were found. It was established that the player is encouraged to prioritise set objectives over free play, pursue symbolic rewards, and to be as efficient as

possible in their activity. This produces a play-space in which the player recognises their role in relation to the game as someone who should follow design intentionality and seek productive returns from their time playing.

The following section of this chapter used the observations from the analysis to assess the extent of the corruption of play in this element of AAA video games. It was established that the play through which the player forms their identity in the play-space is frequently corrupted. It was observed that the player is not genuinely free to play as they wish, there is a lack of separation from everyday lived reality, uncertainty in play is discouraged, and play is directed towards productive ends. This serves to reinforce neoliberal structures and subjectivities. Manifestations of corrupted play, identified as the fast travel function and the practice of speed-running, were discussed to highlight the ways in which play is neoliberalised in AAA video games. The significance of this corruption of play is that it robs the individual of a means through which their identity can be informed by non-neoliberal ways of being. Play should be a barrier to everyday reality and hence allow the player to explore new ways of thinking and acting. The corruption of play however reduces the ability of a play-space to operate in this way, with play being structured to instead reproduce neoliberal ideology and entrepreneurial subjectivities.

Chapter 6: Agency

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the degree of player agency in the play-space of AAA video games to determine whether or not play is corrupted by neoliberal ideology. The chapter will begin by studying theoretical literature on the avatar. Hill's (2013) and Mukherjee's (2015) work on the avatar and Richards' (2009) approach to the video game medium will be used to develop an understanding of the player's relationship with their digital manifestation. This will detail how the avatar operates in the play-space. Following this, Althusser's work on ideological state apparatus (2014) will be used to detail how the video game interpellates the player as a subject of video game structures. The purpose of this is to establish an understanding of how neoliberalism impacts behaviour in the play-space.

The next section of the chapter will be the cognitive mapping exercise of the play-space in relation to a player's agency. Non-playable characters and level progression systems in the video games *Fallout 4* (2015) and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018) will be the objects of analysis. The cognitive mapping exercise will create a mental image of the play-space by providing answers to the directives "why am I doing this?" and "what do I get out of this?" In a similar manner to the way the fast travel mechanic was studied in Chapter 5, perk systems in the *Fallout 4* and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* will be studied to highlight how the player is motivated towards making their play productive. The analysis will reveal how the player is motivated to work towards symbolic reward and pursue the design intentionality of the video game structure.

The chapter will conclude by using the observations from the analysis to assess the corruption of play in relation to the agency the player may have in AAA video games. It will be found that play is motivated towards being productive, with the player needing their play to result in an identifiable output that allows them to justify their time spent playing. This form of corrupted play manifests in two forms of play known as "grinding" and "farming". These activities see the player exercise their agency in the play-space towards generating value rather than pursuing other meaningful

experiences which may not generate value, such as moments that produce a purely aesthetic pleasure.

Agency and Neoliberalism

An individual's notions of agency are informed by how they think of themselves and why they think and act the way they do. The dominant ideology then greatly influences an individual's notions of agency. It was discussed at length in Chapters 3 and 4 what neoliberal subjectivities are and how they are fostered by a cult of work. In relation to video games, agency is a key component to how play is carried out. How an individual understands their agency within a play-space will be influenced by the perception of their agency outside of it. As has been discussed, the entrepreneurial player will carry pre-existing notions of how the video game will unfold when it is engaged with. I discussed this in the previous chapter in relation to how the video game structures foster these pre-existing ideological notions of how the player should behave. In this chapter it will be established that the entrepreneurial subjectivities fostered within neoliberal structures are further reinforced by the individual establishing how their agency is exercised within the play-space.

The core ideological tenant of neoliberalism (the organisation of life according to economic criteria) serves to reinforce a central premise, 'the locus of control is the individual exercising agency through (free) market operations' (Wrenn, 2014, p. 1233). Neoliberal ideology is reproduced as the individual adopts and performs an entrepreneurial subjectivity. In addition, as discussed previously, this logic extends into non-economics realms that become neoliberalised, such as that of the mother-child relationship being boiled down to input and output of capital. The premise of exercising agency is done according to market operations and economic criteria. Wrenn observes that 'the interdependence of agent and structure must be acknowledged while also recognising the simultaneous independence of each—the autonomous and internal forces—which propel agent and structure down their respective evolutionary paths' (2014, p. 1232). The individual does of course have choice, they have the ability to resist subjection by the dominant ideology, but the

dominant ideology will also apply pressure from the institutions and apparatus the individual interacts with.

Althusser's concept of ISAs was discussed in Chapter 4 (2014, pp. 1-2) (2014, pp. 75-76) (2014, pp. 76-77). It was observed how AAA video games work as an element of neoliberal ideology, as a neoliberal object. The game, as part of the structure, will reproduce relations to production and other social relations. Similar forms of pressure from the ideological state apparatus experienced by the individual operate from the framework and structure of the video game. From here the player has a sort of conditional agency within the video game as it can be exercised within the framework of different AAA video games.

What needs to be addressed from here is the role and degree of player agency in relation to the video game. Even though the player is inputting commands to be followed by their avatar it will be theorised here that the player is a subject of the game. In addressing this issue, we can look at Althusser's theory of interpellation. Interpellation is in effect the act of ideological recognition. Althusser notes that ideology imposes self-evident facts that 'we cannot *not* recognize and before which we have the inevitable and eminently natural reaction of exclaiming (aloud or in 'the silence of consciousness') 'That's obvious! That's right! That's true!'" (2014, p. 189, emphasis added). Althusser goes on to add that '*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects*, through the functioning of the category of the subject' (2014, p. 190, emphasis added). Althusser gives the example of police shouting "Hey, you there!" at an individual, with this individual then being transformed into a subject in their response to the hail (2014, pp. 190-191). The video game performs a similar function for the player, with the narrative and structures of the game addressing the player via their avatar. The game's "hey, you there!" is how the player is addressed in terms of their objectives and motivates play within the video game. The video game will not necessarily hail the player with a "hey, you there!" but the structures of the video game will make hailing-like demands of the player. As will be discussed in the next section, non-playable characters will give the player instructions, text instructing the player of their objectivities will appear on the

screen. As an example, Navi (a small fairy designed to provide advice and guidance to the player) is a recurring character in the *Zelda* series of video games and will appear to the player and yell expressions like “Hey! Listen!” in order to guide them towards objectives and points of interest. The interpellating hail will not always be as literal as “Hey! Listen!”, but it will be coded into how different elements of video game structure (be it non-playable character or level progression system) informs the player of how they are to progress along with design intentionality.

The video game interpellates the player as a subject of it. The player may be inputting commands, but they are beholden to the rules, structures, and directives of the video game that directs and confines their play. It is obvious to the player that they should follow the rules, engage with the structures, and progress the narrative via their play; being a subject to the game as a neoliberal object is what play is within AAA video games.

Hill notes that the avatar can be understood as an ‘extension of a specific person’ (2013, p. 83). He uses Lyotard’s work to describe the avatar as a tensor, so that the avatar is understood as the ‘intensity of the individual... or what we would more commonly think of as her desires or intentions’ (Hill, 2013, p. 81). This partially relates to the concept of intersubjectivity that was discussed in Chapter 5 through the work of Butler. All we know is made up of signs, with the avatar being an immaterial signification of the individual it represents at that moment. The avatar, as a tensor, is an intense manifestation of the individual’s desires and wants at the moment it operates. Hill’s work is focussed on interactions between individuals online but the player’s interactions in the game world through their avatar will hold similar considerations. The avatar within the video game can too be thought of as a tensor, as it carries out the player’s will to play. The player is using the avatar to express desire or realise intentions at that moment of play. The player’s agency must be exercised via this avatar and so what happens in the game world to the avatar, in a sense, is happening to the player. The consequence of the player’s actions in the play-space are reflected by the avatar.

Mukherjee notes that the word avatar comes from a Sanskrit word and means the 'crossing-down' of a god to free humanity from evil' (2015, p. 203). Mukherjee also notes that the video game avatar is likely closer to this Sanskrit meaning than interpretations of it within academic literature due to video game's 'complex process of involvement and identity-formation than the sense of the straightforward graphical representation of the user's alter-ego' (2015, p. 205). This conclusion is drawn as the avatar in the video game is able to be multiple things at once, as how the avatar in the Sanskrit sense is able to be 'totally human and totally divine at the same time' (Mukherjee, 2015, p. 205). Hill too notes the Sanskrit origins of the word avatar (2013, p. 69). The avatar has to serve the purpose of being multiple things at the same time in order to allow for proper agency within the environment in which it exists. In the video game, the avatar has to be the "human"/playable character but also a separate digital entity. The avatar is the manifestation of the player and their desires and intent within their play. The avatar is the sign that is representative of a part of who the player is and what they do whilst operating as a separate entity.

Richards uses the Derridean notion of *différance* to explore our relation to the video game as an object. *Différance* is a term meaning a difference and deferral of meaning, with the term itself effectively operating as a play on differ and defer. The word itself does not look how it sounds. The concept infers that signs cannot give a complete picture of what they are, some meaning will be missing depending on how it is viewed. In order to give a fuller meaning a sign must relate to other signs in order to convey it, signs that are different. The avatar in the video game can be viewed as such a sign, as it must relate to the structure of the game and the player in order to demonstrate its meaning.

Richards notes that 'in the game there is a clear (and essential) undecidability between the first and the third person subject positions (performative and constative respectively) whose vibrating-interlace will deny the ability of the space-of play to wrap up its incorporated 'protagonist'' (Richards, 2009, p. 205). This is an issue that arises due to a lack of genuine agency on the part of the player in the video game. Richards resolves that the video game is a 'différance engine and this is the slippery

diegesis of the game's fluid futurity' (2009, p. 208). The game generates meaning from the player's actions through the structures and narratives the avatar engages with, as a *différance* engine it produces different signs. Richards may refer to it as slippery and fluid in the same way that Bauman refers to modernity as liquid (Bauman, 2000). AAA video games, as media, can be symptomatic of the society that produces them. The meaning and purpose that they offer the player in the play-space is liquid just like the player's physical reality.

Richards also refers to video games as 'haunted' in the sense of hauntology (2009, p. 206), inferring that the player is neither present nor absent in the video game. Hauntology is a portmanteau of haunting and ontology that denotes the persistent return of elements of the past in a ghostly manner. The concept of hauntology comes from Derrida's work *Spectres of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international*. Derrida uses the term hauntology to describe his analysis of Marx's work and the recurring figure of the spectre or the ghost, noting that Marxism haunts Western society (1994). Derrida asks if there is a '*there*', between the thing itself and its simulacrum' (1994, p. 10, emphasis added). This concept of there being something between the thing and its simulacrum is what Derrida calls hauntology. As was inferred by Richards in relation to video games, this notion of something being neither here nor there implies that something has a haunted quality.

Hauntology has been applied to multiple areas of study in order to consider the qualities of different cultural fields. For example, Fisher applies hauntology to music culture, observing how the Arctic Monkeys sound like they could be from the 1970s but there is something not quite right about it (2014, pp. 18-19). Fisher's work relates to how elements of the past haunt the present. Richards highlights how in offering a perspective to the player 'the game is prevented from coinciding with such narrational first or third personage; for the interactivity of the game makes a mockery of the taking-up of these inside/outside positions: the game invaginates this divide' (2009, p. 206). Video games in operating this way cause a split. Players both are and are not their avatar when playing the game. They are their avatar in a sense that it represents them in the game world and is a manifestation of their will to play (a

tensor) in the play-space, they carry out the desired actions and interact with digital objects on their behalf. They are not their avatar in the sense that the avatar is doing something for the player, in making them feel more productive and supplementing their identity rather than being them. This is what gives video games their haunting quality. The actions of the player are neither here nor there and requires the avatar for it to be exercised.

The necessity of the avatar is linked to why video games are played, it serves as a conduit through which the player experiences different elements of play. Richards' open conclusion is that as the player we are not really playing a video game, rather 'we are facing our incompleteness' (2009, p. 209). I argue that rather than facing our incompleteness through play, our play is instead a means of dealing with this incompleteness. The consequences neoliberalism has on the self (which I have discussed in earlier chapters) produces effects which cause the individual to feel alienated. The notion of alienation within neoliberal structures extends to an individual's sense of self. As with hauntology, the individual's self is neither here nor there as it is in a constant state of construction and exists within structures that foster entrepreneurial subjectivities. The activity of play, through the tools that enable it, is part of the ongoing process of identity formation. Thinking about this in relation to Hill's work on the avatar, the player's avatar is an extension of the person it is representing, the player remains incomplete, but the avatar provides another piece. The player is really playing the video game as it is an activity which can go some way to removing incomplete elements of the self. How AAA video games are embedded within neoliberal structures problematise this, however. As has been discussed, the play-space is not separate from everyday life and as such can serve to further foster entrepreneurial subjectivities rather than allow for imaginings of different ways of being. This will be demonstrated in the next section of this chapter by considering how the player is interpellated by video game structures and consequences this has for how play is conducted.

Non-Playable Characters and Level Progression Systems: “Why Am I Doing This?” and “What Do I Get Out Of This?”

The purpose of this section of the Chapter is to carry out a cognitive mapping exercise of the play-space relating to the player’s agency within it. This will be carried out by using the non-playable characters and level progression systems of *Fallout 4* and *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* as objects of analysis. Neoliberal structures within the play-space will be made visible by providing answers to the directives ‘why am I doing this?’ and ‘what do I get out of this?’ Non-playable characters and level progression systems are an element of video game structure that can be used to demonstrate how player agency is exercised within the play-space. Studying how these two components operate when engaged with by the entrepreneurial player can reveal how neoliberal subjectivities can be fostered within the play-space.

In *Fallout 4* the player’s avatar will meet several non-playable characters very early in the narrative of the game. One of the non-playable characters that the player meets is called Preston Garvey. Preston Garvey is a member of a group called the Commonwealth Minutemen and is found by the player upon completing the opening quest of the game, “Out of Time”. Speaking to Preston Garvey instigates the quest “When Freedom Calls”. In completing this quest Preston Garvey, and other non-playable characters, will settle in the map location called Sanctuary meaning that Preston Garvey now has a generally fixed location in order for the player to interact with him. Beyond Preston Garvey, interacting with non-playable characters is a core activity of *Fallout 4* and multiple other AAA titles. The purpose of interacting with these characters is often to initiate a quest or objective for the player to progress towards. Other games which follow the narrative trend of having non-playable characters dispense tasks tend to be other open-world style games like *The Witcher* series, *Assassin’s Creed* series, *Far Cry* series, *Grand Theft Auto* series and many others. Speaking to someone in order to gain information on what they should be doing in the game will be a familiar experience for many players of AAA video games.

Preston Garvey has been selected as a particular non-playable character to focus on because of the nature of the tasks he sets and the reputation he has within the gaming community. Preston Garvey sets many different tasks for the player and is involved (sometimes integrally) with 15 separate quests over the course of *Fallout 4*'s narrative progression. On top of these 15 quests, Preston will task the player with procedurally generated⁴⁷ quests that involve the player helping settlements across the game world that are under attack or in need of assistance. These quests are seemingly infinite, and Preston Garvey will continually issue these tasks to the player upon interaction. The player will always find something to do and something to progress towards if they talk to Preston Garvey.

Figure 15: Preston Garvey in Fallout 4.

The way in which Preston Garvey requests the player's assistance in *Fallout 4* has become a running joke within the gaming community, spawning the "Another settlement needs our help" meme (Know Your Meme, 2016). This meme is based upon interactions with Preston Garvey. Figure 16 is an example of one such meme, depicting Preston Garvey as Jack Nicholson's character (Jack) in *The Shining* (1980) in a scene where he batters down a door with an axe to get to his terrified wife. Other such memes created by members of the gaming community paint Preston Garvey as robotic and relentless in his mission to provide the player with tasks. Preston Garvey is sometimes depicted as being unaware of other situations that seem more pressing (such as the central protagonist's mission in *Fallout 4* being to locate their kidnapped child) and even able to pursue the player into different video games entirely to heighten how determined Present Garvey is to give you these tasks (Hernandez, 2016). He will often state something along the lines of "I've just got word of another settlement that needs our help" or "if you've got time, something else has come up" and he will then mark the settlement on the player's map to instruct them where they need to head. These objectives are often time sensitive. Hernandez describes talking to Preston Garvey as a 'trap' as it means 'inevitably accepting quests' that will

⁴⁷ Algorithmically generated quests that will continue throughout a player's time playing a video game that makes use of it.

continue to procedurally generate themselves (2016). The player does not have to agree to help for the quest to begin and then they are pressured to complete it as not doing so will have ramifications for their reputation and ability to progress aspects of the video game. I argue that these Preston Garvey memes and the reception to him demonstrate the way in which AAA video game structures attempt to interpellate the player as a subject. This demonstrates that neoliberal ideology is woven into the structures that enable play, as it is organised in such a way that reduces uncertainty, limits playful activity, and motivates activity towards seemingly productive ends.

Figure 16: Preston Garvey meme depicting the relentless nature in which quests are given to the player.

Preston Garvey's behaviour as a non-playable character, despite the treatment it has received within the gaming community, is somewhat typical of how other non-playable characters behave in other AAA video game series. For example, *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* contains recurring non-playable characters that will appear throughout the player's time playing the game. Each time they will have another task for the player (or reward relating to previous tasks). It does not even have to be a character in the sense that it is a person; it just needs to be an object that dispenses a task to the player. *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* contains noticeboards and message boards throughout the game world that have tasks that procedurally generate at different intervals. Some of these quests will also be time sensitive according to time outside of the game. For example, a procedurally generated quest could appear on the message board that the player will have 7 days (real time, not game time) to complete.

Figure 17: The message board menu in Assassin's Creed Odyssey

Figure 17 is an example of what occurs when a player engages with a message board in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. The specific requirements to complete tasks, recommended level, and rewards are displayed for the player to accept their task. The player can of course choose not to accept them but if they do not then they may

be able to play in a way that is free (in Caillois' terms) but directionless in terms of objectives. Without a set task to complete they cannot hope to earn as much experience, in-game currency, or valuables; they should then listen to and follow the instructions of the non-playable characters (or message board) if they want to reap rewards from their play. The idea of play having direction is an expectation of how a AAA video game would tend to unfold.

There are narrative pretences in both the examples given. In *Fallout 4* the player could be responding to a raider attack on a settlement while in *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* they could have accepted an assassination contract on an Athenian or Spartan general. However, in both cases the underlying motive is at the very least the digital reward. Looking at figure 18, a section of figure 17, illustrates the previous

Figure 18: Mission information and rewards in Assassin's Creed Odyssey

point. The player asking "why am I doing this?" and "what do I get out of this?" in terms of the particular action is given a narrative reason, they are doing this specific quest because they need to eliminate Athenian Strategoi in order to weaken Athens. The main motivation however is listed below, the potential digital reward that the player is compensated with for using their play to complete the given task, the answer to the question "what do I get out of this?"

In many ways, non-playable characters have a similar role to that of maps and menus discussed in Chapter 5. They are part of a structure that seeks to direct and motivate players to think and act in certain ways. The way that players are motivated to act structures play in a methodical and ordered manner. This can be seen in the language commonly used to describe play in AAA video games relating to the tasks dispensed by non-playable characters. A phrase commonly used to describe the sort of tasks dispensed by Preston Garvey and other such examples is open world busy-work. This phrase is used to describe tasks of little substance that are designed to pad out AAA video games which seek to offer the player as much opportunity for play as possible. Sinha notes multiple AAA video game titles that contain a lot of open world busy-work claiming that 'each game had its own open-world bent but seemed primarily geared around completing a set checklist of missions and objectives for the sake of

levelling up or gathering more followers or clearing icons on a map' (Sinha, 2018). The style of play involved in open world busy-work is supposed to be about exploration of a huge world and engagement with novel events but what it tends to do is induce boredom and a sense of obligation within the player, who is levelling up and completing tasks for the sake of it as Sinha noted. Sometimes this levelling up can take the form of item collection that was discussed in Chapter 5 as it will also have a ramification for the player's accumulation of in-game resources or XP.

There is a long history of players having objectives or goals to achieve when playing video games, but the structure of modern AAA video games attempts to interpellate the player as a form of worker. The player is set tasks to complete by an external source, but they then become responsible for completing tasks within the game world with a sense of obligation attached to these tasks. We can view this process of interpellation in the emergent quality and degree of player agency that it allows for. Player agency can be observed in how the player progresses through a levelling system and what their motivations are for doing so.

The reward that players receive for completing tasks often sees their avatar level up in some way. Level progression systems in video games have a long history with early role-playing games on consoles like the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) that were influenced by *Dungeons and Dragons* board games.⁴⁸ One such role-playing game is *Rygar* (1987). The game had permanent power ups that mechanically worked in a similar manner to perks found in modern AAA video games, and not just role-playing games as they are present in first person shooter titles like *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* games. The general form that these systems usually take is that the player acquires experience points (sometimes referred to as "exp" or "XP") for completing tasks. These points then contribute towards the player's overall "level" which is effectively a form of in-game ranking. For example, in *Fallout 4* the first narrative driven objective for the player is a quest named "Out of Time". Upon completion of all the stated objectives within the quest, the player will be rewarded with roughly

⁴⁸ The NES was launched in 1983.

200 XP.⁴⁹ If the player was at the first level of level one and has one XP, upon completion of the quest they would reach level two as it requires 201 XP to reach level two. When the player levels up they earn the ability to acquire a “perk”, which is a sort of buff or bonus that the player can use to improve their avatar. For example, figure 19 is an image from *Fallout 4* in which the “Locksmith” perk is highlighted. If the player chooses to select this perk then their avatar will be able to pick Master locks (the most difficult locks to break in the game), something impossible without the perk. If the player wanted to reach the highest prerequisite level to activate different perks in *Fallout 4* they would need to be level 50 and so would have to accumulate 98,001 XP throughout their game.

Figure 19: A sample of the perks (and the requirements for them) available to the player of Fallout 4

Whilst there are different forms of levelling systems in video games and other forms of games, the progression system that involves the accumulation of XP that is then spent on perks or benefits to the player is common to the point of being ubiquitous in modern AAA video games. The XP and perk combination of levelling is often referred to as a skill tree. In a video essay on the subject, Mark Brown explores the spread and design of skill trees in AAA video games.⁵⁰ He states that ‘skills trees are...a nice way to make players feel like they have grown in power over the course of the game’ (Brown, 2018). Brown goes on to cover issues affecting modern skills trees, highlighting that the player receives points towards perks ‘simply by playing the game normally’ (2018). This references that playing the game and doing things is enough to generate value used to acquire perks, with Brown stating that it is significant how this accumulation of XP points occurs in a way that can encourage a certain play style or new ways of playing (2018). Perks can be used to incentivise play or ways of playing; they provide a reason for the player to do what they do. Figure 20 shows the skill tree for *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey*; the player earns an ability point whenever they level up which is then used to purchase perks in the skill tree. For instance, there are

⁴⁹ Different character perks and player stats will affect the amount of XP received.

⁵⁰ This is done under the YouTube channel named “Game Maker’s Toolkit”. This channel explores different elements of video game design.

perks within the “Warrior” section of the skill tree that allow the player to access new moves for use in combat and the ability to apply fire damage to their weapon.

Figure 20: The skill tree in *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey*

The accumulation of XP and the nature of skill trees implies an arbitrary nature to the accumulation of value through completing tasks and following instructions. Perks and traits on a skill tree are markers of this progression, working as an affirmation that the player has played and played well (according to instruction). Althusser’s notion of abstraction can be used here to illustrate the purpose of perks within the video game in motivating play. Althusser states:

Every specific practice (labor, scientific research, medicine, political struggle) abstracts from the rest of reality in order to concentrate on transforming a part of reality. To abstract is ‘to detach’ a part of reality from the rest of it. Abstraction is, to begin with, this operation, and its result. The abstract is opposed to the concrete as the part detached from the whole is opposed to the whole (Althusser, 2014, pp. 105-106 cited in Toscano, 2015, p. 70).

Toscano follows this observation of Althusser’s by commenting that ‘the irreducible plurality of human practices is accompanied by a correlated plurality of regimes of (practical) abstraction’ (Toscano, 2015, p. 70). The act of methodical in play to obtain perks or levels is an abstraction but one that is bound to the practice of literal work and the need to be productive. There needs to be a reason for the player to play and these symbols of progression supply that and justify what the player has done. The perk is a viewable component of the abstraction that allows the player to say “I have done what I have been told and this is what I have for doing so. I am better for it”. For example, the player can observe their progress in *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* by looking at what level they are and what perks they have obtained thanks to the quests and tasks they have completed, they can draw the direct relation that they have played according to the structure and have become better for it.

In many AAA video games, levelling and progress need not end. *Fallout 4* has no max level that the player can attain. Whilst it is theoretically possible to continue to level up forever in this game, it is noted that the game will crash⁵¹ when the player reaches level 65,353. Despite this, Bethesda Game Studios (the developers of the game) claimed that it was possible to keep levelling if the player is playing, as shown in figure 21. As an aside, this thesis would argue that the language used in the below tweet is significant. The terms 'playing' and 'levelling' are separated. It was likely this was not deliberately done but it reveals that levelling can be thought of as something outside of play in a video game, a separate function of engagement with the video game. This is a very literal manifestation of the concept of endless play. Play, being unbound from leisure, is used to deliver infinite symbolic reward for the player. The entrepreneurial player has the knowledge that they can always become a higher level and hence better.

Figure 21: A tweet from Bethesda Game Studios about the lack of a level cap on Fallout 4

Play, in terms of level accumulation and the completion of tasks, is endless in that it can be continually justified as it provides the player with a visible output from their play. Therefore, endless play is an integral concept to the entrepreneurial player who wishes to play with permissible justification. Being able to state you are a high-level player of *Fallout 4* is not necessarily a marketable skill, but it does allow the player to justify their time spent playing. The player has to justify their time playing because of the notion that they should be entrepreneurial through all their actions. Being able to state that they were playing to level up means they were playing for a reason rather than just playing for the sake of playing.

Assassin's Creed Odyssey originally had a level cap of 50 but this was raised after the game's release to 99 and a new game+ mode was added (Weber, 2019). There is not a reason why this cap could not be raised again given the way it was added to the game and the new game+ mode shows there will be the incentive for the player to start again if they feel there is nothing left to do and complete their tasks again. These

⁵¹ If a game were to 'crash', it will abruptly cease to function.

examples are reminiscent of Lyotard's hyperbolic argument about contemporary capitalism seeking to overcome the ultimate finitude of the heat death of the universe (1991). Limits to productivity cannot be acknowledged, as value needs to be perpetually pursued, if thought and action are to be done and judged according to economic criteria then continual growth and progress will be motivated. This is an underlying motivation within the play of the AAA video games studied, the game directs the player to keep playing towards the end of perpetual growth and productivity, or until the game breaks. Endless play is something that is redundant, it robs play of its temporal potency and ideal ability to suspend everyday reality as the activity is undertaken. The player's agency is exercised to address a neoliberal subjectivity and I argue that this is a significantly damaging thing. The ability to act for the sake of acting is important in being able to recognise genuine joys and desires, but, when play is structured to foster neoliberal subjectivities, it needs to be interrogated as to whether or not our play is being done for our enjoyment or if it is just another action in which the individual can claim "I am working".

Corruption of Play

This section of the chapter will use the analysis conducted in relation to the directives of play to assess the extent to which play is corrupted with regards to player agency. The cognitive mapping exercise in the previous section demonstrates that player agency within the play-space is exercised in a way that reinforces pre-existing neoliberal notions of how actions should be justified.

The following traits of the play-space in relation to player agency can be discerned as:

- The player is encouraged to follow design intentionality of the video game by following instructions given to them through elements of the games structure.
- The player is motivated to seek symbolic rewards through their play and ensure their play is continually contributing towards that end.

- The player is motivated to continually level up or improve as the video game allows, indefinitely if possible, as doing so signals that the player is becoming visibly better.

In selected AAA video games, it is apparent that player agency within them in relation to the directives of “why am I doing this?” and “what do I get out of this?” is not thoroughly separate from their everyday lived experience. Work too has colonised play in this respect, the foreman has been internalised by the player’s willingness to complete laborious tasks and also externalised as non-playable characters become a sort of foreman within the video game, like Preston Garvey in *Fallout 4*. The player’s willingness to accept these tasks can be read as the internalising of the foreman. An email from an individual’s work-life can appear on their smartphone outside of their contracted hours of work, having the world of work interfere with the life outside it and players could be playing a video game as they are given a procedurally generated task they are incentivised to complete without actively seeking that task. It is part of the wider bleeding of work-life into personal life. The message board from *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* previously discussed works in a similar manner to the work emails arriving on a personal smartphone outside of work hours. Here the video game replicates an individual’s relationship to work within neoliberal structures as something hard to escape from or ignore. They are continually reminded that there are tasks to be completed, that they should be productive, even during the supposed free and separate experience afforded by play. As Hill observed, there is always the opportunity for labour to colonise leisure (2015, p. 25). In this respect neoliberalism corrupts play.

In terms of the play being unproductive, this feature of play is again corrupted in the instance of player agency. In responding to the directives of “why am I doing this?” and “what do I get out of this?” the player is expected to be productive in their play, either through achieving a set of objectives or generating value in the form of XP in a level progression system. Playing becomes part of an obligation orientated towards the player levelling up. Berardi observes in relation to cognitive labour that ‘the very notion of productivity becomes imprecise: the relationship between time and the

quantity of value produced becomes difficult to stabilise, because not all the hours of a cognitive labourer are equal in terms of productivity' (2005, p. 58). Video games are a potentially appealing cure for this source of anxiety. The visible progression systems and clearly signposted objectives of AAA video games will appeal to the player who wants to feel useful and productive. The 'anxiety-ridden need for identity' (Berardi, 2005, p. 60) is also, at least temporarily, sated as the individual can chart their productivity and value and assign themselves an identity from the game frameworks. The player is doing this because they are responsible for their own progress. As earlier discussed in relation to identity and neoliberalism, it is up to the individual to find their identity; this is part of the appeal of identifying with the video game avatar. There is then the central tenement of neoliberalism to consider, thinking and acting according to economic criteria. The best way (in the neoliberal sense) to act whilst identifying with the avatar is to generate as much value as possible because it makes the player feel valuable by association. So, "why am I doing this?" is answered by the player taking directives in order to maximise the productivity of their play and "what do I get out of this?" is the digital rewards and XP from completing the task so they can say or think "I am productive", "I have used my time well", or "I am level 50". It is significant that there is a discrete numerical value to levels as this supplies the signifier of identity the player looks for, and the higher the level the more weight this identification carries.

The entrepreneurial player of the AAA video is motivated to always be working towards something, their agency within the video game in this reinforces the notions of entrepreneurial selfhood present in multiple areas of life within neoliberal structures. The player attributes value to their own actions by seeing an identifiable output, justifying time spent playing to themselves is necessary to prevent cognitive unease resulting from the clash of neoliberal imperatives to be productive and the desire to play.

Grinding and Farming

A particular manifestation of corrupted play that is shown by how a player exercises their agency within a play-space is viewable in the practices of "grinding" and

“farming”. The form of play that has the player continually playing for the accrual of XP or towards level progression is called grinding. Discussing positives and negatives of grinding Hernandez describes the process of grinding as being all about ‘payoff’, stating that:

You're working hard for something, and then when you get it—the level, the item, the win—you feel like you've earned it. My resentment stems from feeling as if it's always required that you put in an arbitrary amount of time into something before you're allowed to have something in real life (2013).

It should be noted, as well as the use of ‘working’ for the level the player is seeking to attain, that grinding often refers to repetitive tasks within video games, like the discussed quests given by Preston Garvey in *Fallout 4*. The word “grind” itself carries negative connotations, calling to mind notions of seemingly endless work. The avatar carries out laborious tasks for the sake of productivity and value. The video game seeks to prompt the player to be their most entrepreneurial self. The player asks what they can do and what they get from doing it and they are then interpellated as a worker of the game’s systems, working towards levelling (generating value from their play). Althusser gives the example of teaching in schools ensuring ‘subjection to the dominant ideology, or else the practice of it’ and also that this form of ideological subjection of the individual ensures the reproduction of labour-power and class relations (2014, pp. 51-52). We see this reproduction of the ideology in the instances of grinding in AAA video games.

Grinding is a concept that produces a lot of discussion within gaming communities, often negative (Bycer, 2018), and it is noted how grind within video games is more prominent than it has ever been before (Paez, 2020). However, grind has been discussed in a positive sense occasionally. For example, forum site Reddit contains an actively engaged with post in which many players of video games discuss why they enjoy or appreciate the grind within certain video games (Reddit, 2019). Some players cite that the grind allow them to become better and some even highlight contradictory feelings of falling into patterns of grinding before becoming annoyed

at themselves for spending time grinding. I argue that the existence of grinding reflects an ideological enjoyment of tasks within video games, that affirms the existence of neoliberal ideology within the play-space, both in the architecture of digital space and the way in which player agency is exercised. The performance or enjoyment of grind within video games affirms a neoliberal subjectivity within play and so causes no dissonance within the player who can justify their actions as having been undertaken towards a productive outcome.

The player's interpellation as a subject of the game who is encouraged to better themselves through their productive play serves reinforce the pre-existing ideological notions that the entrepreneurial player brings with them into the play-space. This relates to the work of Bordwell discussed in Chapter 5, in which it was observed that the fast travel mechanic reinforces neoliberal imperatives, observations of players "grinding" or "farming" in games affirms that the patterns of play emerge that relate to entrepreneurial forms of selfhood. This observation can be further enforced by looking at the concept of 'farming' in AAA video games. Farming is very similar to grinding as it involves repeating tasks in order to gain XP or in-game items. Farming can be perceived as a more concentrated version of this, however. Players effectively harvest XP and in-game items that can be useful to them. This is playing the game for the purpose of accumulating resources to improve the player's in-game situation.

Figure 22: Search results for "sekiro farming" on YouTube on 07/05/19

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice (2019) is a video game in which farming can become an important part of the player's experience. Figure 22 shows the search results on YouTube for 'sekiro farming', the videos guide players on what the most efficient and effective ways of farming are available in the game. XP is not the only thing farmed in *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice*; there are items integral to core mechanics in the game which are finite resources that the player needs a plentiful stock of, such as the in-game currency and "spirit emblems" that allow the player to use their avatar's special abilities. Farming in a similar video game, *Bloodborne* (2015), is almost essential as necessary items relating to core mechanics (like healing and ammunition for weapons

and abilities) are finite resources that do not regenerate as play resets after an avatar's death or resting at a checkpoint, but are instead items the player has to collect from set locations or defeated enemies (Eurogamer, 2018). In both instances, the farming is about gathering essential and/or beneficial items or XP. The player is still playing but the nature of this play is about the accumulation of resources, as if they were working a contracted set of hours at a service job, repeating similar tasks in the knowledge that they are accumulating value that they can use. These farming or grinding routes detailed by the videos in figure 22 often specify routes that are simple and lack random encounters. The player is encouraged to learn the patterns of enemies they are farming for items for example, making the task more efficient. Uncertainty in the outcomes of play would be detrimental to this way of playing the game.

Players of AAA video games often make use of what is known as "glitches". A glitch is a temporary fault in the video game's systems, many of these glitches are often visual in nature but there can be instances in which players can exploit graphical or texture issues to their advantage.⁵² Sometimes it is possible for players to exploit these glitches to their benefit. The way in which players find exploits or glitches is similar to the motivation for using cheats in a game. As Hamlen and Blumberg noted 'cheating can actually be a form of creative problem solving and thinking outside the box. When evaluating the ethics and creativity of cheating in video games, it is important to consider the goals, the context, and the outcome' (2015, p. 94). Exploits and using glitches are thinking outside of the box for the purpose of speeding up progress towards something within a video game or circumnavigating obstacles. There is a temptation to say that exploiting glitches within video games could be a way to reject neoliberal play but I would argue that the exploitation of glitches is likely motivated by the desire to progress towards objectives faster, and so displays a neoliberal attitude towards play.

⁵² As glitches are a part of the video game structure that is exploited by the player, they are sometimes known as 'exploits' as well as glitches.

A well-known glitch is the ‘tree glitch’ in *Dark Souls 3* (2016). This involves running at a tree at a precise angle in order to execute a jump to a platform they should not be able to reach without playing much more of the game, accumulating 20,000 souls⁵³ (the in-game currency) and acquiring a necessary item. The player is exploiting the mechanics and graphical layout of the game. One guide which informs the player how to do this describes it as a ‘straight up cheat’ as it allows the player to heal 4 times rather than 3 which will make parts of the early game considerably easier (Rosenberg, 2016). If they followed the design intention for their progression then there should be no way they could do this in the early game on a first play-through. It normally does not take long for players to find ways to exploit issues within a game’s framework and structure. *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* was released on the 22nd March 2019 and shortly after many players found a way to skip an otherwise necessary enemy by precisely jumping onto environmental walls using a decorative part of the environment that the player should not be able to access. Speed-runners (discussed in Chapter 5) found many of these exploits and glitches (Degraffinreid, 2019). It is effectively finding ways to work the game more efficiently, reproducing the dominant neoliberal ideology as their thought and action are assessed by the imperative to justify actions as a form of work that produces something.

Player agency from the discussed examples in this chapter is reminiscent of the factors discussed by Foucault for the control of human activity. Foucault states that the disciplining of human action can arrange ‘a positive economy; it poses the principle of a theoretically ever-growing use of time...it is a question of extracting, from time, ever more available moments and, from each moment, ever more useful forces’ (1991, p. 154). The player is likely aware that their level accumulation in video games cannot be marketed but the level accumulation reflects to themselves that they have extracted something from the use of their time. Even if it is only to themselves, this use of time can be justified in line with neoliberal imperatives. The player progression systems encourage the player to operate in this way; the play

⁵³ To put this in perspective, early enemies in the game can drop around 30 souls when defeated, the limited number of more challenging enemies drop around 220 souls, and the first boss drops 3,000 souls. This may require the player to farm enemies as discussed earlier.

should achieve something and make use of time spent playing. This is how the players find themselves grinding or farming towards levels or objectives, as they need to maximise the productivity of their play. Foucault goes on to state that this subjection forms a new sort of being, where the body is one 'of exercise, rather than of speculative physics; a body manipulated by authority, rather than imbued with animal spirits' (1991, p. 155). The player's avatar can be seen as the body that is beholden to the structure of the video game for the purpose of maximising the value they can derive from their time in the game. Even acts of non-conformity that go against the intentionality of structural design, like exploiting glitches, are often done for the purpose of more efficiently progressing towards something. The player's experience of the AAA video game is directed towards being productive so in this sense play is corrupted by the influence of neoliberal ideology as it seeks to judge play according to economic criteria.

From these observations, we can also call into question just how free the player is to play as they wish. Play is not given a chance to be unproductive or free within AAA video games, there always has to be something to progress towards. Komlosy notes that in Weber's native tongue of German there is little difference between the words for leisure, being idle, and idleness (2018, p. 76). This connection between the idea of idleness and leisure can be understood as how leisure itself is treated within neoliberal structures. It is an activity in which the individual is being idle and hence unproductive, which according to neoliberal imperatives is a waste of time. It motivates individuals to change their behaviour and justify what they are doing at all times as being something worth doing. There is an anxiety that time spent doing or thinking has to be justified in terms of what it produces and we see that in the outputs generated by the player in AAA video games. Play with nothing to show for it is not worth it, so the player is motivated to play in the pursuit of concrete goals.

Muriel and Crawford note that 'video game culture shows us that agency is part of both emancipatory and alienating practices', highlighting that the notion of agency is strongly influenced by the 'hegemonic political rationalities of neoliberalism' with video games both fostering and reproducing neoliberalism but also facilitating 'new

and more promising modes of agency' (2018, p. 182). Whilst referring to the culture around video games this logic holds for the content of video games themselves. As seen from the analysis in this chapter, video games will reproduce neoliberal ideology in the way that player agency is motivated and directed. Within the directed and motivated forms of agency within AAA video games is the notion that work will make you better. In this respect, play is corrupted in terms of the lack of separation from everyday life, the lack of genuine player freedom in the agency they have, and that player action is orientated towards productivity. Whilst play and work are not two discrete entities, play performed according to economic criteria make it reflect the practice of work in a neoliberal socio-economic system. The distinction between play and work becomes less obvious. Player agency in AAA video games replicates the player's relations to the wider socio-economic system outside of the game they play, they have to justify their time playing and so work at being better in the game world. Player agency is not separate from everyday life, the player is not genuinely free to play as they wish, and the player is motivated to be productive in their play. Play is corrupted by neoliberal ideology here.

To summarise, play is corrupted in these ways:

- Free: The consistent reminders of tasks and linking of the following of design intentionality to improve potentially limits what the player can do within the play-space.
- Separate: Play is potentially corrupted concerning separation as the player of AAA video games is given a similar degree of agency, as they would be outside of the play-space. There is the constant reminder of tasks to be done as the video game's structure is tailored towards giving the player something to do.
- Uncertain: Play is highly structured through the non-playable characters and level progression systems, serving to reduce uncertainty. Uncertain outcomes would also be detrimental to ways of playing that seek to extract maximum value from play.

- Unproductive: Play is corrupted concerning the unproductiveness of play as the analysis relating to the previous characteristics of play are all tailored towards making sure the player is doing something productive with their play.

Conclusion

This chapter began by considering Althusser's work on interpellation to discuss how notions of agency operate within neoliberal structures. It was observed that the process of interpellation extends into the play-space, influencing player agency as the player can recognise themselves as a subject within a AAA video game's structures. The chapter went on to discuss Hill's (2013) and Mukherjee's (2015) work on the avatar and Richards' (2009) approach to the video game medium to develop an understanding of the player's relationship with their digital manifestation, known as an avatar. This established that it is through this avatar that the player recognises their agency, what happens to the avatar in effect happens to the player and signifies the results of their actions as well as demonstrating the potential purpose of their actions.

The next section of the chapter was a cognitive mapping exercise of the play-space in relation to the form of agency the player has in AAA video games. The objects of analysis were non-playable characters and level progression systems in the video games *Fallout 4* (2015) and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018). A critical reading of these features provided answers to the directives "why am I doing this?" and "what do I get out of this?" which provided a mental image of what sort of play was enabled by the play-space. It was observed how the player is motivated to follow set tasks and increase their level whenever possible as this is what made their avatar (and by extension themselves) better. Play becomes an activity that can be endlessly justified according to economic criteria, in doing so losing the temporal qualities that can provide meaningful experiences outside of everyday reality.

The final section of this chapter assessed the corruption of play using the typology relating to the ideal conditions of play and analysing the practices of grinding and farming in AAA video games. It was observed that players are not genuinely free to

play as they wish, the play-space lacks total separation from everyday reality, uncertainty of outcomes is discouraged due to the highly structured nature of play, and the player is encouraged to make all their actions productive. The significance of the corruption of play concerning agency in it is the ability it has to affect the way individuals think about interactions with others and processes in general. As was discussed in the concluding section of Chapter 5, subjectivity becomes more neoliberal and so the individual will already think of what they are in economic terms. It is not a radical jump from here that others would also be thought of in economic terms. Human relationships and action boil down to what value is within them and what the individual can get from each relationship. One's own relationship with a sense of self can also be affected by the notion of value, with individuals assuming they need to be doing or working towards something of value in order to feel valuable themselves. The ideological significance of play is evident here, showing when it is embedded within neoliberal structures it can be repurposed towards reinforcing neoliberal subjectivities rather than allow for the exploration of playful pursuits.

Chapter 7: Ideology

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the consumption of the AAA video games and in doing so, to demonstrate that the AAA video game operates as an organ of neoliberal ideology. The chapter will begin with an analysis of literature on the function of different institutions within wider ideological structures. The work of Althusser on ideological state apparatus (2014) that was discussed in Chapter 4 will be revisited and discussed in tandem with Srnicek's work on platform capitalism (2017) to demonstrate how ideological apparatus operates in neoliberal structures. It will be observed that the individual within these structures takes multiple opportunities to train themselves to become better as a form of human capital by exchanging value with different apparatus. This section will also make a note of Virilio's (1995) (2006) and Tomlinson's (2007) work on speed to emphasise the importance of time within neoliberal structures.

The next section of the chapter will contain a cognitive mapping exercise of the AAA video game as a site of consumption. The objects of analysis will be downloadable content available for the video games *Fallout 76* (2018), *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012) and the microtransactions available in *FIFA 19* (2018), *Mortal Kombat X* (2015), and *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017). The cognitive mapping exercise will be carried out with a critical reading of the noted features of the AAA video games and providing answers to the "how can I play more?" and "how can I play better?" directives. It will be observed that downloadable content fosters entrepreneurial subjectivity within the player, highlighting the opportunity to play more in exchange for more of their resources. Microtransactions further foster these subjectivities and exploit the intensification of work within neoliberal structures towards the purpose of extracting more resources from the player. Microtransactions in effect become an answer to endless play. Downloadable content offers the player more activity but create the dilemma of requiring more time to complete. Microtransactions often save the player time, making the player's activity more efficient.

The chapter will assess the corruption of play in AAA video games in relation to how that play is consumed. It will be observed that play is corrupted due to the function games serve within neoliberal structures. AAA video games, through the methods of consumption they enable, reproduce neoliberal ideology. AAA video games, as an object, are grounded within neoliberal structures and are part of the ideological apparatus that reproduces neoliberal ideology. As a result, the play-space they enable is too grounded within neoliberal structures. The prevalence of networked features in AAA video games and how microtransactions exist to serve desires for instant gratification will be discussed to demonstrate how corrupted play manifests in how AAA video games are consumed. Play in AAA video games is never completely separate from everyday reality as it becomes an activity explicitly tied to a player's socio-economic circumstances. Additionally, the entrepreneurial subjectivities enabled by downloadable content and microtransactions emphasise productivity in play and discourage uncertainty of outcomes.

Ideology and Neoliberalism

In Chapters 4 and 6 I introduced some aspects of Althusser's work on ISAs and interpellation and the extent to which it can be applicable to the study of games and neoliberal ideology. In summary, through engagement with the AAA video game as an object, neoliberal ideology is realised and reproduced both through the pre-existing ideological assumptions of the player and the neoliberal ideology woven into the structures of the AAA video game. Althusser's work on interpellation was used in Chapter 6 to highlight how the AAA video game as neoliberal object interpellates the player as a subject of its structures. The interpellating hail is coded into how game structure informs the player of how they are to progress. I raise this again to highlight how the AAA video game format further interpellates the player as a consumer. The way the AAA video game medium is consumed also serves to reproduce neoliberal ideology and the methods of consumption interpellate the player again as an entrepreneurial subject. This incorporates the act of play into the wider ideological structure. AAA video games are in effect one of the 'state organs' (private and public institutions) that allow for the hegemony of the ruling class' ideology (Althusser,

2014, pp. xxiv-xxv) This can be demonstrated through an analysis of platform capitalism and the culture of speed and immediacy.

Srnicek identifies platform capitalism as a predominant business model that is seen in the practice of corporations like Facebook, Google, and Uber (2017, pp. 42-44). Srnicek highlights how the platform model is used to extract data as a raw material (2017, p. 89). Srnicek also highlights that platform capitalism has 'inbuilt tendencies to move towards extracting rents by providing services' (2017, p. 126).

The AAA video game can also be understood as a platform. Speaking specifically about these corporations Srnicek observes:

Platforms, in sum, are a new type of firm; they are characterised by providing the infrastructure to intermediate between different user groups, by displaying monopoly tendencies driven by network effects, by employing cross-subsidisation to draw in different user groups, and by having a designed core architecture that governs the interaction possibilities. Platform ownership, in turn, is essentially ownership of software (2017, p. 48).

There is much here that is reminiscent of AAA video games and how they have been conceptualised within this study. AAA video games, as a system of rules that enable play, naturally draw groups of people that want to play as they are seeking a meaningful experience. Users engage with the platform that is often hosted on a networked console, playing a video game that has a governing set of rules designed for it. The AAA video games, once purchased by the player, are owned by the player yet the presence of further options for consumptions in the form of downloadable content and microtransactions signals the lingering ownership that the publishers have of the play-space. This allows the publishers to extract a rent from play. This is not only a literal extraction of money from the player (although it may be for the publisher) but also an extraction of time and activity from the individual by the ideological apparatus that enable play. Neoliberalism exercises itself by the operation of ideology within the framework of the AAA video game. The drive towards

productivity that is fostered by neoliberal structures is effectively monetised by the architecture of AAA video games.

Joseph's work on the video game distribution platform Steam⁵⁴ notes that in 2015 Steam introduced the ability to buy and sell user created mods⁵⁵ in video games hosted via the platform, especially *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) (2018, p. 691). Joseph goes on to highlight how this ability promotes the player of a game to think more in terms of systems rather than engage with games as a 'playful pursuit', noting that 'the 21st century will be defined by the increasingly acute sense of loss when it comes to games' (2018, p. 692). The community crisis that Joseph highlights comes about due to the contradiction between 'making something fun or useful and the economic value that arises around the creation of these mods' (2018, p. 693). The incursion of capital into what Joseph deems 'playful pursuits' produces this dissonance as the ideology of capital cannot be reconciled with that of ideal play that I have discussed in this thesis. This shift both in terms of the ability to buy and sell within the game and the community crisis highlighted by Joseph is indicative of the increasing prevalence of neoliberal ideology within and surrounding AAA video games.

Joseph's work demonstrates how a platform for the distribution of video games has adapted to foster neoliberal ideologies but that AAA video games themselves have become a platform through which the same is achieved. The networked nature of modern AAA video games allows them to be engaged with as a platform for the generation of different forms of cultural, social, and economic capital. The AAA video game as a platform also controls the player in the Deleuzian sense, as was discussed in Chapter 5. As the platform extracts rents from the player, it obtains their financial and time resources. Money is made and neoliberal ideology is reproduced by the fostering of entrepreneurial subjectivities. The AAA video games role as a site of consumption serves to further reproduce neoliberal ideology in this way, prompting

⁵⁴ Steam is a video game distribution service established by Valve in 2003. At first intended to provide updates to video games published by Valve it became a digital storefront for third party publishers as well as their own games.

⁵⁵ "Mod" is short for modification and signifies an alteration of video game content made by a player or fan rather than the developers or publishers.

the player to exchange their resources for perceived value. This manifests in the selected objects of analysis for this Chapter, in downloadable content and microtransactions. Within these two elements of AAA video games it is revealed how the video game operates as a platform and places an emphasis on time and productivity when the player carries out their play.

The importance of time within neoliberal structures can be demonstrated by engaging with the work of Virilio and Tomlinson. Virilio's work was discussed in Chapter 5. It was noted how through the globalisation of location, 'WHERE loses its priority to WHEN and HOW' (1995, p. 155). This refers to the importance of speed and immediacy within neoliberal structures, relating to the time-space compression observed by Harvey (2005, p. 4). Distance, and the wait produced by distance, is an obstacle to be overcome in the name of efficiency. Virilio stated that 'the reduction of distances has become a strategic reality bearing incalculable economic and political consequences, since it corresponds to the negation of space' (2006, p. 149). Virilio goes on to add to this that '*the strategic value of the non-place of speed has definitively supplanted that of place*' (2006, p. 149, emphasis added). As speed overrides space, the space can lose its meanings and potential. To apply this to the play-space, the player is concerned with their *time* in the play-space rather than what they do. This observation is in part a culmination of observations made in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6. The player's directives that motivate them to value productive play and eliminate uncertainty signal the concern with time in the play-space. Play has to be justified according to economic criteria, it has to produce something, and the quicker that something can be produced the better.

The disappearance of place that is noted by Virilio's work refers to territorial space (2006, p. 156), I argue this is also occurring with digital spaces. The play-spaces grounding within neoliberal structures reduces its importance but moves it towards being a site of consumption rather than a site of play. The play-space should ideally be completely separate and allow for uncertain and unproductive behaviours, but this cannot be reconciled with structures that demand speed, efficiency, and productivity. In this sense, the space is reduced by fostering the importance of speed

and efficiency. Space becomes something that should be entered only for the amount of time it takes to extract maximum value for that space, demonstrating the priority of *when* over *where*.

Being able to do things quickly is important in terms of satisfying neoliberal subjectivities. Doing things quickly means more tasks can be done, allowing the individual to have a heightened sense of themselves as a form of capital. Tomlinson's work on the culture of immediacy furthers the understanding of the importance of speed in neoliberal structures. Tomlinson suggests that one way we can understand the importance of speed within contemporary society is to observe the 'shift in differentiation between work life and home life, indeed between work and leisure, introduced by the widespread distribution of networked computers' (2007, p. 72). This relates to the observations made in this thesis relating to the collapse of the labour and leisure domains. The networked nature of personal technologies has bypassed the natural barriers to capital and work, allowing the individual to operate according to economic criteria in multiple areas of life. Tomlinson relates this to the establishment of a culture of immediacy. Tomlinson states that 'immediacy stands as a cultural principle in relation to the technological...bases of our particular era of modernity', adding that 'it connotes...ideas of a culture of instantaneity – a culture accustomed to rapid delivery, ubiquitous availability and the instant gratification of desires' (2007, p. 74). Contemporary society is one of demand and expectation that, I argue, is fostered and encouraged by neoliberal structures that emphasise the importance of efficiency and production. This culture of instantaneity identified by Tomlinson that is recognised in the demand for instant gratifications of desires is also reflected in the methods of consumption present within the spaces provided by AAA video games. As will be discussed in the following section of this chapter, microtransactions often allow the player to save time, signalling that the player can choose to reduce their time playing in order to advance towards some form of gratification faster. For example, the Ultimate Team mode of the *FIFA* video games, that has been discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 1, could see the player devote a lot of time and energy to accumulate in-game currency to acquire packs of new players or they could save the time playing by spending money on FIFA points to

purchase packs. The microtransaction eliminates play in order to appease a desire for instant gratification.

Consumption itself is an interpolative act. For example, when you order goods from the distributor Amazon you buy into those structures and what they entail. You may not necessarily be endorsing Amazon and their practices, but the act of consuming through their infrastructure serves to normalise the methods of consumption and logistics enabled by it. The same occurs when microtransactions are consumed via the AAA video game format. Microtransactions are an especially insidious form of consumption that serves to reproduce neoliberal ideology as they are small transactions that are motivated by a fostered desire to save time. The consumption of AAA video games has an inherently ideological dimension, as the consumption of play becomes an everyday act in which neoliberal ideology is reinforced.

To develop the observations made in the chapter so far, time needs to be understood as a resource within itself. Baudrillard highlights how the phrase 'time is money' that tends to govern daily life has turned time into a commodity to the extent that one could think of people operating on a 'time-budget' when they perform everyday activities and how their leisure time is spent (2017, p. 171). Baudrillard states the logics of consumer society lead us to view 'free time' as in fact being time 'earned' (2017, p. 171). As with Virilio's work on speed, time is once again of the essence. The player must consider their time, budget it as Baudrillard states. Further to this time being earned it must be justified, as without justification it is time wasted. As will be observed in the cognitive mapping exercise, time is a resource that can be purchased back with the use of microtransactions after further activity enabled by downloadable content. The video game simultaneously offers endless activity and faster ways to carry out that activity.

Tomlinson highlights how the culture of immediacy is understood in its temporal mode: 'of closing the gap in *time* or more precisely, of abolishing *waiting*' (2007, p. 92, emphasis added). This gap in time denotes the time between wanting something and having it. Tomlinson states that a feature of the culture of immediacy is that the gap, however, appears '*already closed*' (2007, p. 91). This amounts to the destruction

of whatever it is between the wanting and the having, the anticipation and experience that existed in between. To relate this to the conceptualisation of play within this thesis, the player plays in order to have a meaningful experience but the meaningful experience itself is not arrived at as a destination. The experience is gained from the act of play itself and what is prompted from the activity. The elimination of the gap between wanting and having within the culture of immediacy is destruction to the concept of play itself. The entrepreneurial subjectivity of the individual, ironically, sees play as the barrier to the final experience rather than the method of attaining that experience.

The AAA video game as a platform for consumption and the culture of immediacy together reproduce the entrepreneurial subjectivities that are fostered within neoliberal structures. The act of play becomes an inconvenience in the process of consuming the video game, which for the entrepreneurial player can be a means of declaring they have been productive. The AAA video game format, in allowing further consumption in the play-space, become a site in which neoliberal ideology is reproduced. The following section of this Chapter will demonstrate how downloadable content and microtransactions operate and produce the conditions described above.

Downloadable Content and Microtransactions: “How Can I Play More?” and “How Can I Play Better?”

This section of the chapter contains the cognitive mapping exercise of the play-space as a site of consumption, using downloadable content and microtransactions as the objects of analysis. These objects enable consumption which, as observed in the previous section, is an interpolative act. Downloadable content and microtransactions cater to neoliberal subjectivities and in doing so reinforce the ideology. Insight will be provided by critically reading these features and providing answers to the directives “how can I play more?” and “how can I play better?”

Downloadable content for AAA video games are varying in nature and sometimes referred to as additional content. It is generally content for the video game that the

player chooses to add after the initial purchase. It is a ubiquitous feature in AAA video games with the vast majority of titles offering some form of downloadable content to supplement what is known as the base game (the game as it is at the time of initial purchase).

Before looking at specific examples of downloadable content, the phenomenon in video games needs to be historicised and the language surrounding downloadable content should be explored. In the past, charging for additional content for an already purchased video game (especially AAA titles) was a contested by players but now it is a commonplace practice in the distribution of AAA video games (Bonilla, 2017). An academic guide on launching a successful video game highlights that 'in 2011, 51% of console owners purchased at least one DLC; while in 2014, 40% of game sales included digital content, subscriptions and other online purchases' (Ahmad, et al., 2017, p. 10). These figures show little sign of slowing, nearly \$5 billion was made from downloadable content sales in the games industry in 2016, with EA Games alone making nearly \$1.3 billion from downloadable add-ons to its games (Jeffrey, 2017).

This goes some way towards explaining the commonplace nature of additional downloadable content for AAA video games as it is a means to generate further profits from a product and the market has continued to grow. It has also been highlighted how DLC has lost its 'historical meaning' of relating to minor additions to games as it becomes more eclectic in nature, with DLC now referring to a vast array of add-ons to games that vary in form and purpose (Payne, 2018, p. 71). Payne also notes that it is especially important to pay attention to the marketing and distribution of downloadable content as it becomes more central to the production and consumption of the video game at a time it 'sheds its plastic casing' (Payne, 2018). Becoming central to the consumption of AAA video games is exactly what downloadable content has done; it is not really possible to find a AAA release that does not have some form of additional content, whether in the form of additional missions, narrative, or even aesthetic changes to in-game avatars.

By analysing the language used in the marketing of downloadable content and how it is described and received in the gaming community it is possible to begin to theorise

on how it relates to play and the expectations it creates for the player. There is now an identifiable pattern to the way AAA video games are consumed, with Bonilla summarising the pattern of downloadable and additional condition within AAA video games as 'pre-order, release, in-game currency, micro-transactions, paid DLC, and season pass' (2017). The stages here are all terms that have entered the lexicon of the gaming world and come along with the vast majority of AAA releases. The language used to describe the steps in these processes changes the way the player approaches AAA video games. There is a pattern of consumption extending beyond buying the game and then proceeding to play that game, with the player being conscious of and motivated to engage in further consumption to enhance their playtime with the game.

Indeed, some AAA video games are released alongside what is called a 'road map'. A road map details what additional content will be released and when and the player is often given the opportunity to pre-purchase this content, essentially purchasing the promise of an opportunity to play more in the future. *Fallout 76* has a road map that details additional content. Players are promised new missions, game modes, and other features. Figure 23 details these new features, providing images for all the new content, and hence more play that the player can expect in the near future. It serves to promise the player future opportunities for consuming more play, that there will be more content that can provide potentially meaningful experiences. This road map style release normalises the act of a video game being continuously consumed. The act of play becomes yet more tied to the act of consumption.

Figure 23: Roadmap for Fallout 76

Additionally, the way the neoliberal ideology has begun to operate in *Fallout 76* is indicative of a wider trend in the video game industry, especially AAA video games. *Fallout 76*, as of 2019, is the latest game in the long running *Fallout* series of video games. The series has been known for its single player gameplay with a story driven focus, with the player's avatar being the central figure in the middle of a wider narrative. *Fallout 76* however breaks from this and is effectively becomes an MMO

(as discussed in Chapter 1). This changes the previously private playing experience public, as the player will encounter other players whilst playing. This is not a new development in terms of gaming as online multiplayer have existed for a long time but it is significant that a series known for its single player focus has shifted to being an online multiplayer, with this shift also causing anxiety among fans of the *Fallout* series (Hernandez, 2018). A gameplay feature that worried players was that players would have the ability to launch nuclear weapons that would affect the gameplay experience of other players sharing the play-space. The root of this anxiety can be in the further neoliberalisation of the play-space. This also signals that there is a resistance amongst players, that there is a general sense of unease as play becomes more endless and networked. This can be studied by future research as it is beyond the scope of this thesis to be able to conduct a thorough study of player's attitudes to these changes. I would argue that this anxiety stems from the unease through which play struggles to provide a meaningful experience as it becomes networked and endless that signals that play is grounded within neoliberal structures. The public and infinite nature removes potential private significance that play can have to an individual. There is a sense that rather than *playing*, the player is *consuming*. The player, rather than being able to enter a private separate space finds themselves acting as a consumer as they must be able to buy further opportunities for play. This is a result of the interpolative effect of the play-space being grounded within neoliberal structures. This ensures that neoliberal subjectivities will be fostered through the engagement with the AAA video game format.

Many AAA video games are also released in multiple forms at the same time, usually referred to as "special editions" or some variant of this. For example, *Red Dead Redemption II* was released with a standard edition, a special edition, and an ultimate edition. Each listed addition contains more additional content for the player and they also become increasingly expensive with the increased amount of additional content. For example, the ultimate edition (the most expensive edition) contains exclusive content not available in the standard edition. This content covers missions, horses the player can ride, gameplay bonuses and boosts, and free outfits and weaponry for the player's avatar. The gameplay boosts are especially significant as if the player can

afford the most expensive edition their play will be more productive in terms of the in-game rewards they can generate and they would also receive discounts on in-game items at stores in the game world. Owners of the ultimate edition would rank up faster in the online mode of the game, with their monetary advantage carrying over to their in-game reality. Again, the act of consumption here serves to interpellate the player, catering to a pre-existing ideological idea to be as productive as possible. The insidious influence of neoliberal ideology upon the AAA format reinforces the notion that meaningful experiences can be sought through the act of consumption.

As well as the different editions of *Red Dead Redemption II* available to the player, if they were to pre-order the game before release players would receive additional content from this form of consumption also (Rockstar Games, 2018).

Figure 24: Different editions of Red Dead Redemption II

Literature on consumers of video games identify that video games are 'experience goods', meaning the consumer judges the good based on their experience of it and then evaluating what to do and if they need more of it from there (Dey & Lahiri, 2016, p. 550). The hope of those selling the game is that the player wishes to play more and purchase an additional content. What the presence of multiple editions of AAA video game releases infers is that different experiences can be had with different editions, and the language around the releases also ties into this. An ultimate edition for example infers the 'ultimate' experience for the player, as it would offer the complete amount of available content. Whilst the player is not forced to purchase the 'ultimate' edition, there is an ideological imperative to obtain it as otherwise their experience of the game would not be as total as possible. The entrepreneurial subjectivities that are forced by neoliberal ideology would have the player pursue the ultimate experience. The AAA video game is visible here as a platform, with different players having varying degrees of access to it. Players with more resources means have the ability to derive more from their play by gaining the ultimate experience, with the clear implication that their play will have *more* to it than a standard access to the play-space. As was stated in the previous section, the platform has a tendency to

extract rent, in the case of AAA video games the extraction can be a literal financial one but also the activity of the player who will offer more to the game assuming they are getting the special or ultimate experience, as opposed to a standard one.

Monetisation of the player's desire to play can take place as early as the game's initial release. Not only will the player have to purchase the base game they wish to play they often also have the option to purchase additional content immediately. What is referred to as "day one DLC" or "zero-day DLC" is additional content that is made available as the base game is released. A guide on launching a (financially) successful video game says that this is done as a 'marketing tactic' with the aim being that the 'lower and cheaper version of the game would encourage the customers to try and get hooked on the game' and so translate this addition to increased profits (Ahmad, et al., 2017). For example, *Mass Effect 3* was released on the 3rd March 2012, and on the same day downloadable content for the game entitled "From Ashes" was released. This downloadable content contained a new squad character, two additional missions, a new weapon, and alternate outfits for all squad members. As noted in the previous paragraph, all these extras cater to an entrepreneurial subjectivity to have more. This reproduces neoliberal ideology as the act of continually consuming via the AAA video game platform becomes an everyday experience. The way in which the player could obtain this material was to have purchased the collector's edition of the game or buy the base game and then pay a recommended retail price of \$9.99 for the additional content (the collector's addition was commonly priced at £70 in the UK). The timing of the release of this content was branded as a "disgusting" business practice by many within the gaming community, prompting the question that if material for the game is ready for the day of its release then why is it not sold as part of the base game? (Schreier, 2012)

Figure 25: Promotional Material for Mass Effect 3's From Ashes DLC

The reason for such a release relates back to the guide on releasing a successful video game, it is to get the player 'hooked' so they spend more. This seems to feed into the old stereotype of gaming being addictive and framed as an addiction, viewed as a bad

habit. This exploitative business model has indeed seen a re-emergence of the language of addiction being associated with video games, with the game *Fortnite* (2017) drawing the focus of this renewed moral panic (Rajan, 2018). A behavioural expert likened *Fortnite* to 'heroin' (Haller, 2018). It is not the game itself that is the addictive component of this consumption however, it is the value obsessiveness of productivity fostered by neoliberal structures. The culture of immediacy also plays a visible role here. Additional content coming about alongside the initial release signals the demand for more and instant gratification. There is always the demand for more activity and possibility for return, and day one downloadable content is a natural consequence of gaming within neoliberal structures. As the entrepreneurial player asks "how can I play more?" they are met with multiple options of consumption from the moment the play-space is made available to them. The option of more play is there if they have the time and money to acquire it, and if they do not acquire the additional content or ultimate edition then they have not got the most out of the game that they can.

A specific form of additional content within AAA video games that has drawn significant attention in recent years is that of microtransactions. In the context of gaming, microtransactions are a small financial exchange that takes place online. Microtransactions often offer additional resources or elements of a video game to the player that change resource allocation or make aesthetic changes within the game. Possibly the most common form of microtransaction in AAA video games is the ability to purchase currency for use in-game with real money. For example, in *FIFA 19* the player can purchase FIFA points that can be used in the game's Ultimate Team mode that was discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 2. At the game's launch, £79.99 could be used to purchase 12,000 FIFA points from a video game specialist retailer (GAME, 2019). A premium gold pack is the most valuable base pack available to players, costing 7,500 coins or 150 FIFA points, so 12,000 FIFA points can be considered a very large amount of points. Purchasing these points allows the player to purchase the packs that contain the cards that represent different players without having to play the game itself. When the player plays the game, they will amass coins based on their performance that cannot be gathered with real money. These coins

can be purchased by playing or selling player cards that have been obtained, and FIFA points are the form of currency that can only be obtained with real money. The compensation of play with an in-game currency is nothing new, as players will often be gifted an in-game currency for the completion of tasks if an in-game currency exists within the game world. However, the currency gained from *FIFA* video games is linked to real currency.

The earlier mentioned Ultimate Team mode is present in EA's *FIFA*, *Madden*, and *NHL* franchises of games and in 2016 earned the company \$650million (Handrahan, 2016). In the *FIFA* series, Ultimate Team mode relates to assembling a squad of players that are obtained by card packs that were mentioned in the last paragraph, with individual cards representing players or items that enhance different in-game aspects.⁵⁶ The way in which these packs can be purchased is indicative of the wider functioning of loot box⁵⁷ microtransactions in AAA video games. Baker summarises it neatly by stating that what players are doing is 'paying real currency for in-game currency to buy loot boxes whose contents are completely randomized' (Baker, 2018). I argue that the Ultimate Mode in *FIFA* produces a sense of possibility and frustration in the player through presenting all the possible content that the player could have if they had more time and money to devote to the video game; there is always a sense of incompleteness because there is always more to do and obtain. However, players are constantly rewarded with enough to keep them playing as they play. There will always be more cards to collect and more games to play. For example, there can be a special edition of a player card in addition to any versions of their card that already exist released at various point of the year. This results in there being multiple cards that represent the same footballer. For example, Lionel Messi of FC Barcelona in *FIFA 19* has 8 different cards that represent him in the game, all of which have varying statistics and values.

⁵⁶ Packs can contain different kits that a player's team can wear, stat boosts to apply to players for matches, and many other aesthetic and mechanical changes.

⁵⁷ Loot boxes were discussed in Chapter 1 .

Figure 26: Lionel Messi's FIFA 19 Ultimate Team Mode Team of the Season card and its value. The numbers listed in the top banner (99, 99, 98, 97, 96, 95, 95, and 94) are the statistical ratings of Messi's 8 different cards in FIFA 19

Visible in figure 26 for example is the Team of the Season card that represents Messi. This is one of the eight variants of a card that represents Messi in the video game and, in terms of ratings and ability, this is the best possible variant. Even if the player has another variant of Messi there is another, better, card that could still be obtained.

The likely price of the Messi Team of the Season card was roughly 2,650,000 coins (the in-game currency). If the player wants to acquire this item they will have to play the video game, acquiring the coins to purchase it through play. One way in which players can play in this game mode is by engaging in a competition against AI opponents in Squad Battles. In this game mode within a game mode, players compete over a set amount of football games in an effort to achieve the most points possible. Points are awarded for wins, performance (detailed further in figure 27), and difficulty setting (the harder the difficulty setting the more points the player can expect) (Green, 2019). Given how the difficulty setting factors into points awarded, it stands to reason that the player would want the best cards available to them in order to better compete. For example, an attacking footballer with better shooting stats would be more likely to score goals and a goalkeeper with better stats would be more likely to prevent goals against the player. The entrepreneurial player would carefully consider how they play in order to generate more points towards the better rewards. If the player had scored 5 goals then they would have ensured the maximum amount of points return for that element of the performance. For the player seeking to ensure maximum value there would not be any point in scoring more goals as it would risk the opposition gaining possession again.

Figure 27: Player scoring values in Squad Battles mode in FIFA 19 (Green, 2019).

The top player in the world in this game mode at the end of a cycle would usually be awarded with 100,000 coins, two ultimate packs, and two rare mega packs (Green, 2019). Not everyone can be the best player in the world but obtaining a high ranking will undoubtedly require a lot of investment of time and the bettering of the player's

skills within the video game. The type of pack that would offer the best probability of obtaining a variation of Messi is what is known as an Ultimate Pack, costing 125,000 coins or an estimated £16.66 worth of purchased FIFA points (Lopes, 2018). These are very rarely made available and the probability of obtaining a player card rated at 90 or above is 3.4% (Murphy, 2018). Probabilities accurate as of 11/09/2018 indicate that the possibility of obtaining a player's card that is rated over 84 was 4.5%, inferring that if a player were to open 100 of these packs then only 4 or 5 times would the player card within be rated above 84, with the odds of obtaining a 90 or over rated player even smaller (Murphy, 2018). There is a consensus in the *FIFA* gaming community that players rated 80-89 are very good and 90-99 are considered excellent (Fifplay.com, 2018). In relating these observations to pack odds there is a very small chance of acquiring a card that can be considered very good when opening packs. What this information denotes is that to purchase the Messi card, or another highly rated card, would require a lot of time playing the video game or good luck in the opening of packs. The player can also use FIFA coins to acquire packs, and hence coins from the sale of players obtained from. The significance of these microtransactions is that the purchase of FIFA coins can eliminate the need for play, if the playing of the game is being used towards the end of purchasing packs. If this is the result of the play, then the play is in fact a barrier. The player can exploit (as they would with glitches discussed in Chapter 6) the consumption enabled on the AAA video game platform to satisfy a potential need for instant gratification.

The significance of the packs within the Ultimate Team mode of *FIFA 19* and the ways of purchasing them is that the drives of the entrepreneurial player, seeking to play better, are fostered. The devotion of more resources, whether time or money, towards the game will produce a better result. The consumption of the AAA video game becomes an end, with the play of that very video game often being a barrier to that consumption. The reason for this is that consumption enabled through microtransactions allows the player to arrive at the result of what the play produces (the symbolic reward of the game). The case of *FIFA 19* is significant because the use of microtransactions can be used to circumnavigate the need for play in acquiring symbolic rewards. This demonstrates the insidious influence of neoliberal ideology in

the AAA video game format. Consumption can surpass play as the primary activity within the play-space enabled by the game. The player can effectively buy their meaningful experience that would normally have been provided by their play.

Figure 28: YouTube videos on FIFA pack openings and the amount spent on the packs. Captured 21/06/19

One streamer⁵⁸ of the *FIFA* video games spent £13,000 on packs in *FIFA 19* and stated that the highlights of what they obtained were four icon cards⁵⁹ and 4 team of the season cards, one of which was a 99 rated⁶⁰ Messi, and this was deemed a 'good' return (ChrisMD, 2019). The genre of pack opening video in the *FIFA* video games is a popular genre, with streamers often stating how much they have spent in order to obtain these packs (see Figure 28). The player of the video game will likely be aware of these cards that will be difficult to obtain but the fact that they are there means there are cards that exist that could make them a better player. The player could invest a large amount of time in playing the game to accumulate coins or, in line with the culture of immediacy, they could spend real money on FIFA coins for potential instant gratification. Understanding the play in economic terms in this instance means that the play can be understood to be in the way of the output, so removing the play would technically make the player's engagement with the video game more efficient. The player could technically play better by not playing. Neoliberal ideology within the AAA video games functions in such a way that play itself can become marginalised in favour of more *productive* methods of behaviour, like consumption. The culture of immediacy that Tomlinson describes is evident here. Play would merely serve to slow the player down in seeking their experience.

This observation of the play being an obstacle to a symbolic reward can be seen in the microtransactions available in *Mortal Kombat X*. *Mortal Kombat X* sold additional content that made the series' famous fatality finishers easier to perform for a finite

⁵⁸ A streamer is someone who streams footage of their play of a video game on a platform like YouTube or Twitch for people to watch.

⁵⁹ Icon cards are highly rated and rare cards in the FIFA Ultimate Team mode that represent acclaimed players from previous generations. For example, a selection of *FIFA 19* icons are Maradona, Lev Yashin, Ruud Gullit, and George Best.

⁶⁰ 99 out of a possible 99 so this is theoretically the best possible card.

number of times.⁶¹ The player had the option to purchase the ability to perform 5 easy fatalities for \$0.99 and then another 30 times for \$4.99. For example, if the player selected Scorpion to perform a fatality the player could have to win a fight and then enter down, left, right, triangle or down, left, right, up at the required distance. But if the player has easy fatality tokens then they only need to hold R2 and press square or triangle at any distance.⁶² This example of additional content has been slammed as a shameless cash-in by many within the gaming community (Plante, 2015). It has been slammed as such as it shows publishers monetising an element of gameplay that many would expect to be just another additional element to assist with accessibility.

The player does not have to purchase the easy fatality tokens with real money as they do also start with a finite amount of these tokens. The idea behind making controls simpler for specific parts of video games is not a bad thing as it could potentially improve accessibility to the game but, in the case of *Mortal Kombat X*, the simplification of play is monetised. This signals that it seeks to extract further resources from players that may not be as time rich as others or lack the ability of controller mastery, if the player wants to obtain the symbolic reward of the special finishing move. In the way Baudrillard noted that an individual's time-budget will influence their leisure time (2017, p. 171), the entrepreneurial player, seeking the most productive output from their play will have to factor in financial cost and time cost on obtaining what they can from the video game. As was highlighted by some within gaming communities, the easy fatalities could have been made free for those that needed them or there could have been a more comprehensive tutorial (Henry, 2015). Instead, the player's desire to derive an experience from play was monetised further beyond their initial consumption of the video game. The AAA video games operation as a platform within neoliberal structures extracts value from the player

⁶¹ The "Fatality" is synonymous with the *Mortal Kombat* series with it becoming part of a gaming lexicon to signify an especially violent finishing move performed by or on the player.

⁶² These examples are assuming the player is playing on a *PlayStation* controller (see figure 1). Controller inputs would differ on the *Xbox* console. The information listed in the sentence is the inputs on the controller that the player would be required to press in order to perform a fatality finisher. As can be seen, more inputs and a specific avatar positioning is required for the first set of controller inputs, meaning it is more difficult for the player to execute.

whilst fostering their entrepreneurial subjectivities, with the player given ways of obtaining as much as they can from their play. The player is continually given more options to play more and better, in doing so the AAA video game platform reproduces neoliberal ideology.

A guide on launching a successful video game advises against including microtransactions as it can negatively affect the reputation of the developer (Ahmad, et al., 2017, p. 9). Despite this, microtransactions are commonplace in AAA video games. The hostile reaction to microtransactions has been most showcased in the reaction to the initial availability of microtransactions in *Star Wars Battlefront II*. As details of the loot box system within the video game was made available before releasing it became apparent that players would have to spend hours playing before they were able to access iconic *Star Wars* characters like Darth Vader. However, there was the option to spend money on loot boxes and acquire the character much more quickly, similar to how players of the FIFA video game series could spend money on packs to hopefully acquire better footballers faster. The EA Community Team responded on Reddit to angry feedback from those who had pre-ordered or planned on purchasing the video game by stating that the aim was to award players with a 'sense of pride and accomplishment' for unlocking iconic *Star Wars* characters.⁶³ This response became the most downvoted post in Reddit history,⁶⁴ generating around 280,000 downvotes in the first 24 hours after it was posted (Baker, 2018) (Gault, 2017).

Figure 29: Screenshot of EA Community Team post on Reddit. Image captured 17/06/19

The means of earning in-game currency in *Star Wars Battlefront II* was to just play it (again like *FIFA 19* in how coins are earned), with time spent in the game providing the player with in-game currency. It was worked out that a player would have to play for around 40 hours to unlock a character like Chewbacca and around 60 hours to unlock Darth Vader (Gault, 2017). The downvoting of the post on Reddit can be

⁶³ EA are the publishers of the game.

⁶⁴ Post and comments on Reddit can be "downvoted" to show dissatisfaction with its content.

explained by members of the gaming community seeing through the reasoning for the presence of microtransactions in games. It has been highlighted that ‘companies have purposely taken advantage of these loot boxes by making the chances of these items appearance excessively small that it costs a fortune to obtain something consumers want’ (UWIRE Text, 2018). The entrepreneurial player of *Star Wars Battlefront II*, asking “how can I play better?” would want to play as the best possible character to maximise the potential productivity of their play. Playing as the iconic *Star Wars* characters in the video game would mean the player’s avatar can take more hits before dying, special abilities that can quickly defeat opponents, and more attack power. Effectively, the player would earn or buy an advantage in the game if they are able to play this way. This form of play is known as “pay-to-win”. Baker notes that pay-to-win games ‘involve players paying for special abilities or items that give them a significant, and many times unfair, advantage over other players’ (Baker, 2018). The player of the game asking how they can play better is met with the options of investing more of their time into their game or more of their actual money, and given the pressure on the individual’s time within neoliberal structures it is likely that the player would opt to save time by spending money. Also, in line with the culture of immediacy, the player would want instant gratification that can potentially be delivered using microtransactions. Relating this to Baudrillard’s work mentioned in the previous section, time is understood as a resource within neoliberal structures. The space provided by the AAA video game in this instance is not there to enable play but to provide gratification to the player, whether play is how that is achieved is irrelevant. If time can be saved without playing then the player, consuming in line with neoliberal subjectivities, would take that opportunity. It becomes increasingly clear that how players are interpellated by the AAA video game serves to reproduce neoliberal ideology.

Eventually *Star Wars Battlefront II* loot boxes were changed to only contain cosmetic in-game content rather than playable characters and other items that effect performance within the game (Gault, 2018). However, even limiting additional content obtained through microtransactions to aesthetic changes still produces the need to obtain them in order to reflect a player’s productivity and identity. In the

free-to-play⁶⁵ game *Fortnite* players have the option to purchase additional content that changes the appearance of their avatar and remain with the free “default” appearance as additional skins have been cited as being very expensive (Kain, 2018). Hernandez highlights how players that use the default skin are bullied and face pressure to purchase the additional cosmetic content, with “default” used as an insult by younger players of the game and players in default skins being singled out during games (2019). The previously discussed need to define oneself within neoliberalism here is monetised with this additional content and the player is pressured to define themselves in the best way possible.

The platform of the AAA video game that allows for further methods of consumption of play are realisations of neoliberal ideology. Play is made to be something it, ideally, should not be. It is made an act of productive and value-obsessive consumption. Gane highlights Baudrillard’s idea that consumption should not be ‘perceived as the consumption of material objects but of the ideal elements of this differential system’ (1991, p. 33), and this remains true of the digital experience offered by AAA video games. Neoliberal structures foster the need to be productive, to be valuable, and consuming video games offers an opportunity to meet this need but also exacerbates it. It creates potentially endless activity, but this endless activity requires an infinite devotion of time. This cannot be reconciled with efficiency, so the AAA video game platform also offers a means to save time through time-saving mechanics enabled by microtransactions. The AAA video game platform always offers more play and ways to play that additional play better in the economic sense. Chengbing highlights how goods are ‘endowed with a type of social meaning’ as ‘people try to display their status by means of the social significations of their consumption’ (2011, p. 295). This form of consumption can be seen in the compulsive consumption of elements in AAA video games through microtransactions. What can be purchased through these transactions is an ability to signify that the player is better as a player than others. Part of the reason for playing a video game for the entrepreneurial player is the ability to construct parts of an identity, to declare “I am something” or “I am level 50”.

⁶⁵ Free-to-play means the player can begin playing the game without needing to pay for it, although there will likely be an option for the player to begin spending money once they begin playing.

Microtransactions can get the entrepreneurial player to this declaration quicker or give them a means of saying they are better than others. The AAA video game platform becomes a means of immediate gratification if the player has the resources to obtain it.

Corruption of Play

This section of the chapter will use the analysis from the cognitive mapping exercise and the answers to the directions of “how can I play more?” and “how can I play better?” to assess the corruption of play in this element of AAA video games.

The cognitive mapping exercise of the AAA video game as a site of consumption creates an image of the play-space in which the player is:

- Encouraged to consume whatever additional content is available for the video game. Not consuming this content means the player would be missing out on an opportunity for productive activity.
- Encouraged to improve the efficiency of their play with the use of microtransactions which are often time saving devices.
- Ultimately motivated to use methods of consumption present within the AAA video game in order to improve their experience, either by having more of the game or improving their efficiency within it.

The objects of analysis for the cognitive mapping exercise were downloadable content and microtransactions. What enables the player to consume these elements of the AAA video game is the always online nature of most contemporary AAA video games.⁶⁶ The always online aspect of modern AAA video games corrupts play in terms of separation from everyday life. The requirement of an online component limits a player in terms of how they can access online digital spaces. As stated, this most obviously has ramifications for play being separate from everyday life but it also alters

⁶⁶ The always online component of the AAA video game was discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

how the way in which the player makes decisions about how they play given it alters the play-spaces and imperatives that exist within that space.

It was highlighted by Microsoft (makers of the *Xbox* console) that the eighth generation of gaming consoles would be the always online generation and that the *Xbox One* console will need to be connected to the internet to function. Concerned players, worried about things like unreliable internet connections in more rural areas outside of large urban centres, were told to “#dealwithit” by one Microsoft spokesperson (Conditt, 2018). It is yet another barrier to play that corrupts what it is and prevents access to it. The disparity between urban and rural areas in terms of means of consumption and access to digital spaces has been highlighted by research (Knight & Gunatilaka, 2010) (Philip, et al., 2017). The lucrative nature of having this form of access to play cannot be overlooked as in 2017 Activision Blizzard made \$4billion from microtransactions alone (Makuch, 2018) and the server infrastructure required to support gaming with an online component sees companies like Amazon reap a huge financial reward (Halliday, 2018). In this respect, if one were to view the “deal with it” approach cynically, it could be argued that play can be seen as more lucrative by the publishers and developers of AAA video games to those with reliable internet connections and better incomes and so the play for this demographic will be prioritised. The player will have to be conscious of the reliability of their internet connection and their ability to afford a reliable internet connection. To extend this to the entrepreneurial player, their ability to play more and better would be reliant on this internet connection. The AAA video game platform could foster the entrepreneurial subjectivity whilst simultaneously being inaccessible to the player.

Networks and Immediacy

The cognitive mapping exercise has demonstrated that corrupted play is made manifest in the very way AAA video games are structured. It is demonstrated in the extent to which downloadable content and microtransactions are a near ubiquitous presence in modern AAA video games. This development demonstrates corrupted play in two ways, those being the networked nature of AAA video games and the drive towards immediacy in producing something from play.

It should be noted that networked AAA video games are not inherently manifestations of corrupted play, but it is significant that single player focussed video games have either shifted towards or introduced networked elements. This study has aimed to focus on private playing experiences of AAA video games to demonstrate the significance of the collapse of labour and leisure domains in relation to play. However, the video games analysed in the previous section of this chapter contain multiple online and social elements to the play of them. This has been deliberate in order to demonstrate the moving of private play of AAA video games into more public networks. For example, there has been a shift in the *Fallout* series from an offline single player to an online multiplayer game. This development has caused anxiety amongst players of the video game, with Hernandez noting that one fan stated on Reddit the imperative of the video game's designers that "'You can play solo, but you SHOULD play multiplayer!" will ruin the franchise' (2018). I believe this can be read as a process of neoliberalisation, with economic and market reasoning being central to actions of play in *Fallout 76*. The player in competition with other players would have to treat their play in more rational and economic terms. A player in a genuinely private play-space would be more able to play as they wish, establishing more of a barrier to everyday reality through their play. As was highlighted by the worried player mentioned earlier, there is a "SHOULD" imperative for the player to play multiplayer with other players as it would improve their experience according to the intentionality of designers. Whilst it makes more sense in terms of performing well within the game to follow design intentionality, the imperative can go against this player's wishes who may wish to play alone or in ways counter to intentionality. If the play they end up performing is not what they want, then that play is corrupted.

In 2009 Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter noted the 'envelopment of virtual play by capital' becoming increasingly comprehensive with play being a medium in which global capitalism 'excites, mobilizes, trains, and exploits its new planetary work-force' (2009, p. 32). 10 years after this observation it is apparent that capital's colonisation of play has continued and accelerated. The always online nature of the AAA video game platform and opportunities for further consumption reflect the utter lack of separation from everyday reality in multiple sense. The colonisation of the play-space

by neoliberal structures grounds it within the wider media environment, reproducing neoliberal ideology by fostering entrepreneurial subjectivities by catering to the culture of immediacy. The deliberate networking of AAA video games ensures that play-spaces remain connected to possibilities for further consumption and the player being aware of opportunities to be more active and more efficient should they have the means in time and/or money. As was highlighted in Virilio's work, the where has lost priority to the when and how, demonstrated within AAA video games here by how the play-space shifts from one being constructed for the individual to one that enables engagement with others (or at least enables capital exchange or accumulation). This prioritisation of the when is significant here as a private play-space infers that time matters less, in terms of how long something takes to do. The introduction of neoliberal ideology via the network (even though this is not the only way neoliberal ideology is introduced into the play-space) motivates the player to engage with the play-space in a different way.

As was discussed in the previous section, a compulsion to play more and better is a result of the introduction of networked features like downloadable content and microtransactions. The compulsion to play more and better is monetised, leisure becomes something that serves to produce value for external actors to the player and value in terms of symbolic rewards for the player, undermining its definition as leisure or free time. The player's free time merely serves to reinforce the dominant ideology which makes itself ubiquitous in daily life. Baudrillard highlights this by stating that 'leisure is constrained in so far as it...faithfully reproduces all the mental and practical restraints which are those of productive time and...subjugated daily life' (2017, p. 173). This constraining of leisure manifests in the corruption of play. Play is not separate from the everyday lived reality of the player; players must factor it into their time-budget as well as financial means. The player is then not genuinely free to play as they wish, their ability to play is tied to their everyday reality and circumstance.

Microtransactions, specifically in the form of loot boxes, do hold a degree of uncertainty, with uncertainty being a characteristic of play. On the surface, this would

mean that loot boxes would not necessarily be incompatible with ideal play. However, this uncertainty is an exploitative one, designed to foster entrepreneurial subjectivity. The uncertainty of loot boxes is designed to get the player to play more in the seeking of the best possible outcome of their engagement with the AAA video game. It has been highlighted that 'gaming microtransactions throughout multi platform businesses are known to be a leading negative cause in gambling for underage consumers' (UWIRE Text, 2018). A compulsion towards gambling behaviour seems to be a natural consequence of the way in which play is motivated by the AAA video game as a neoliberal object, especially when looking at the methods of consumption through microtransactions in AAA video games. Although this reaction has not been universal, some 'gaming companies across different countries such as Finland, Belgium, Russia and even individual states within the United States (such as Washington State) have declared the outcomes of microtransactions as an act of illegal promotion of underage gambling' (UWIRE Text, 2018). EA, publishers of the discussed *FIFA* series which utilises loot box style microtransactions in the purchasing of packs, calls loot boxes "surprise mechanics" and believe their use to be 'ethical' (Grayson, 2019). In seeking "better" (as in, more productive or valuable) play, players are compelled to spend more of both time and money to guarantee it. So, whilst the outcome of opening a loot box is uncertain, their presence promotes play that lacks uncertainty, as the player will wish to make their play more likely to produce the resources required to purchase loot boxes or do away with play all together and when possible purchase loot boxes with real money. The increasing prevalence of spot-betting⁶⁷ in the past decade shows how gamblers can be dragged deeper into gambling. In the same vein, I argue that the prevalence of microtransactions demonstrate how video game players are dragged deeper into neoliberal subjectivities. These small everyday acts normalise entrepreneurial subjectivities and notions of productivity, further reinforcing neoliberal ideology.

⁶⁷ Spot-betting is the act of gambling upon micro-events in a sporting occasion that is underway. For example, a gambler may bet on the number of throw-ins within a 5-minute window of a football match that is already taking place. Most, if not all, major betting companies enable this form of gambling.

I believe it is significant to ask why this compulsion to gamble seems to have been accepted so readily. Without further study and research that is beyond the scope of this thesis it is difficult to provide an evidenced answer for the prominence of engagement with gambling-like mechanics in video games, however I would argue that the culture of immediacy goes some way in explaining potential motivations of the player here. The discussion of Tomlinson's work highlighted the demand for instant gratification that comes about from the proliferation of networks in multiple areas of life. Play, in many ways, is about the gratification of desires so when that desire is channelled through neoliberal networks that offer the ability to spend to progress faster towards, or even immediately sate, desires then players of video games will likely take those options. The significance of microtransactions then is that they are themselves there to serve a neoliberal desire for gratification, they exist because of the ideological conditions in which AAA video games are played. As how Greene and Joseph observed the 're-scaling' of the digital space in terms of an industry focus (2015, p. 235), I observe this as a re-scaling of the play-space towards accumulation rather than play.

The overbearing nature of networked features and microtransactions in AAA video games do not leave much room for resistance to them beyond not enabling those features if possible. Concepts for resisting these features of AAA video games steps towards the reimagining of the AAA video game format as a whole and so are beyond the scope of this thesis as it requires additional research. To give an idea of how this could be achieved, the networked features of *Dark Souls 3* (2016) are designed to enable contest and cooperation between players, and significantly this is if the player chooses to do this. These networked features do not enable the purchase of microtransactions either, they merely serve to offer more ways of playing the game. In this example, the networked features cater to desires in a way that does not necessarily concern gratification, rather it addresses ways of playing the video game. It may not be a radical feature of a AAA video game, but it is not neoliberal in the way the analysed microtransactions of the *FIFA* series are.

To summarise, play is corrupted in these ways:

- Free: The player is not free to play as they wish due to how access to the AAA video game platform is tied to socio-economic circumstance.
- Separate: Play enabled by the AAA video game is not sufficiently separate from everyday reality as the always online nature of many AAA video games ties to play-space to wider neoliberal structures. The presence of additional content and microtransactions within the networked consoles of contemporary generations also tether the play-space to wider structures, shaping the AAA video game itself as a site of consumption as well as something that enables play.
- Uncertain: While microtransactions themselves often allow access to uncertain outcomes, microtransactions promote the reduction of uncertainty of outcomes in play. This is done by the player wishing to ensure that their play produces in a productive return.
- Unproductive: Fostered by the culture of immediacy, additional content and microtransactions in AAA video games can assist the player in ensuring productivity from their play.

Conclusion

This chapter began by studying work on platform capitalism, speed, and the culture of immediacy. The purpose of this was to establish how neoliberal ideology is reproduced by technological infrastructure and the forms of consumption enabled by them. Those forms of consumption in turn foster a culture of immediacy. It was observed that the AAA video game functions as a platform that extracts rents from the player, those rents being financial resources and time. Through this, entrepreneurial subjectivities are fostered by a culture of immediacy which caters to the entrepreneurial subject's demands for instant gratification of needs and wants.

This chapter also contained a cognitive mapping exercise of the AAA video game as a site of consumption, using downloadable content and microtransactions as objects of analysis. The downloadable content for the video game available for *Fallout 76*, *Red Dead Redemption II* and *Mass Effect 3* (2012) and the microtransactions available in *FIFA 19*, *Mortal Kombat X* and *Star Wars Battlefront II* were critically read in order

to provide answers to the directives “how can I play more?” and “how can I play better?”. In answering these directives, it was observed that downloadable content fosters entrepreneurial subjectivity within the player, highlighting the opportunity to play more in exchange for more of their resources. More play allows for more activity that can result in symbolic reward, but it also requires more time. It was noted that microtransactions further foster entrepreneurial subjectivities and cater to the culture of immediacy, by offering the potential for instant gratification of player wants by offering the player ways to save time. The AAA video game simultaneously offers endless play and a means to circumnavigate the need to undertake this play to achieve the symbolic rewards of play.

The final section of the chapter assessed the corruption of play in relation to the AAA video game becoming a site of consumption. It was observed that play is corrupted by the functioning of the AAA video game as a platform and site of consumption due to the play-space being grounded within wider neoliberal structures. The prevalence of networked features and the desire for immediate gratification via microtransactions was discussed to demonstrate how corrupted play manifests in this area. Players are again encouraged to ensure that their time playing produces symbolic reward to justify their time playing as being productive. The significance of this form of corrupted play is that the technology that enables a space for play is embedded within neoliberal structures, meaning the play cannot be thoroughly separated from everyday life. This prevents play becoming a proper barrier to capital, as play becomes something that actively generates both financial capital and contributes to an entrepreneurial subject’s understanding of themselves as a form of human capital.

Conclusion

This thesis has argued that play is corrupted by neoliberal ideology. This corruption means that individuals cannot truly play, signalling not only the collapse of labour and leisure domains but also the colonisation of leisure by labour. Players are rarely free to play as they wish, the play-space offered is not thoroughly separated from everyday life outside of it, uncertainty of the outcome of play is discouraged, and play is made to be a productive activity in the economic sense. The significance of this corruption is that it fundamentally alters what play is, what experiences can be derived from play, and how we think about the world outside of our play. Play can be understood as an activity relative to the other activities of everyday life, and so these activities inform each other. When play is understood in economic terms, the player's activity becomes just another form of capital to be put towards something, fostering neoliberal subjectivities and ontologies. Corrupted play serves to reproduce neoliberal ideology. If we cannot truly play according to ideal conditions then that is one more barrier to work removed from our lives and neoliberal ideology is further reinforced.

What motivated this study was a desire to identify why play does not feel like play at times when using AAA video games and what the consequences of this are. As was noted in the Introduction, hearing people complain about video games they played, and the nature of the play was a common occurrence. Play in AAA video games no longer seemed to be serving its purpose of providing meaningful experiences to players. This is significant as it means play is doing something other than what it should be providing.

Play should be a barrier from work. It should serve the purpose of allowing the player to remove themselves from everyday reality and seek an experience that is meaningful to them. Marx observed that:

Within the 24 hours of the natural day a man expends only a definite quantity of his vital force... During part of the day this force must rest, sleep; during another part the man has to satisfy other physical needs,

to feed, wash, and clothe himself. Besides these purely physical limitations, the extension of the working-day encounters moral ones. The labourer needs time for satisfying his intellectual and social wants (2000, p. 334).

Marx here highlights the natural barrier to the productive drive of capital. An individual cannot work as they sleep, an individual needs rest, food, hygiene, and clothing. These are physical barriers to capital, but the 'intellectual and social' barriers to capital highlight that people cannot just work. Play can satisfy these 'intellectual and social' wants and represents a moral barrier to work. The player can put up a moral barrier using play. It is essential in human terms that individuals are able to do this or they may not be able to meet their needs.

However, moral and physical barriers mean little to the intensification of work within neoliberal structures. Work is valued enough within the neoliberal hegemony for the barriers to them to mean little. The Fiverr advert in Figure 2 stated "sleep deprivation is your drug of choice" and "you follow through on your follow through" highlighting what the cult of work does to any physical and moral barriers. If the entrepreneurial subject sleeps they lose productivity and if they took time to rest then they would too be losing time that could be spent working. So, if they took time to play (under ideal conditions) they would lose productivity. Why sleep when you could be working? Why rest when you could be working? Why play when you could be working? Additionally, if these activities to cater to physical and moral needs are undertaken then they are rationalised towards making you more productive. The entrepreneurial subject only sleeps in order to make them work better tomorrow, they only rest because it will improve what they do afterwards, and they only play when it produces something for them.

Time playing needs to be won back from neoliberalism in order to make it something of moral value. Marx states that 'if the labourer consumes his disposable time for himself, he robs the capitalist' (2000, p. 336). This sentiment is echoed by Fisher for this age, he states 'if there is to be any kind of future, it will depend on our winning back the uses of time that neoliberalism has sought to close off and make us forget

(2018, p. 519). As shown in this work, neoliberalism has sought to close off play by corrupting it, meaning play in AAA video games serves the purpose of reproducing neoliberal ideology rather than being something of moral value to the player. In this respect, the loss of genuine play is something to be concerned with in human terms. Corruption of play signals that our time is not our own to do as we wish, that we should always be working towards something or we are wasting time, and that the neoliberal hegemony is becoming increasingly inescapable. A deeper understanding of the corruption of play allows for conceptualisation of more ways in which it can be opposed. The barrier of play needs to be put up again or work will continue to dominate everyday life.

Under the title 'Conceptualising the Video Game', Chapter 1 established that a video game is an inherently ideological system of rules that enable fluid forms of play. This was arrived at by studying work in relation to the fundamental characteristics of video games and their societal and cultural context as a media product. Also established in this chapter was that there is a business logic at the core of AAA video games. This logic feeds into a business ontology that conditions the idea that everything should be thought of, and ran, as a business. This in turn feeds into the understanding of play in economic terms, leading individual AAA video games to be understood as businesses in terms of production, consumption, and play. An overview of the ludology and narratology debate within games studies was used to conclude the chapter. This was done to demonstrate that there is always a need to develop new approaches towards the study of video games as the medium and the society within which it is produced are constantly shifting.

Chapter 2 then moved to examine why we play AAA video games. It established that the player of a video game is seeking a meaningful experience, but that this experience can differ, often vastly, from player to player. This was explored by reviewing literature relating to different motivations to the play of video games. Work on neoliberalism was also used to theorise how these motivations can be affected by neoliberalism. The key motivations studied were escapism, involvement, and identity formation as they were seen to represent different forms of motivations for the play of a video game. It was observed that motivations for the play of video

games cannot be taken in isolation, as wider ideological structures will affect how and why we play.

The motivation of escapism is rooted in a desire to separate oneself from elements of everyday reality and seek temporal alleviation of its conditions, such as intensified work. This can be disrupted by neoliberal ideology as its presence can be felt in digital spaces. The motivation of involvement is the desire to play itself, the joy to be found in the act, command, and consequences of play. This motivation can face disruption as neoliberal ideology can affect how the individual, in assessing their thoughts and actions in economic terms, might not value their time playing enough to play how they wish. Identity formation is a motivation for individuals who wish to use the play in a video game to inform their sense of self. Video games provide a space in which the individual can explore and engage with different forms of identity as well as making available an avatar on which identities can be anchored. Neoliberal ideology can limit how the individual is able to define themselves. Similar to the limitation on involvement, the presence of neoliberal ideology in the play-space affects how the player thinks about their play. The common thread that emerged from the study of these motivations was that the player was seeking a meaningful experience, but this experience could be disrupted or altered by neoliberal ideology.

In Chapter 3 the focus was on neoliberalism and play. The chapter established neoliberalism as an ideology that drives towards the organisation of life around a market ethic and economic criteria. The process of this occurring is deemed neoliberalisation, as areas outside of economic realms come to be judged according to economic criteria. The process of neoliberalisation has fostered the business ontology that was highlighted by Fisher (2009, p. 17) was discussed in Chapter 1. Neoliberalism's development as an ideology and the process of neoliberalisation has led to the establishment of a cult of work within contemporary society. The act of work is in and of itself glorified and carrying out (productive) work is something to be lauded. As a result, the conduct of work outside of traditional labour spheres becomes something to aspire to. This leads to the collapse of distinct leisure and labour domains, as work makes its way into leisure. From neoliberalisation and the collapse of the leisure and labour domains a form of subjectivity known as the

entrepreneurial self emerges. The entrepreneurial self is a form of subjectivity where the individual is concerned with maximising (in economic terms) who they are and what they do; as Foucault noted the individual becomes 'an entrepreneur of himself...being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings' (2008, p. 226). The functioning of the gig economy was used to demonstrate how notions of the entrepreneurial self are fostered and how it tends to operate.

The work of Brock (2017) was used to argue how play is becoming neoliberalised in an esports context before demonstrating that this process also occurs in private spaces in the context of AAA video games. The neoliberalisation of play proceeds in a similar manner to the neoliberalisation of other areas; thought and action comes to be understood according to economic criteria. This occurs regardless of relating to a private or public function of life and it is within this context that the concept of endless play emerges. The process of neoliberalisation unbinds play from leisure, meaning play is an activity that can be understood in both leisure and labour contexts. Play becomes something that can be used by the entrepreneurial self to maximise a sense of self, and play can also reproduce neoliberal ideology in this way. Play becomes an element of neoliberal ideology rather than something that can be used to oppose the dominant ideology in this context. This is significant as neoliberalism is something that should be opposed due to the way it affects human thought and action, producing a sense of misery and feelings of inadequacy in many. Neoliberalism is corrupting in itself and play has the ability to counter this, so it is necessary to identify the presence of neoliberal ideology within play.

Chapter 4 detailed the methodological approach that would be used in analysis of video games in later chapters. The chapter began with a review of previous approaches to the study of video games, focussing on structural versus player-centric approaches in order to highlight the strengths and limitations of each. A review of these approaches highlighted the need for a development of a hybrid critical approach to video games as both video game structure and player agency are essential for drawing complete conclusions. A study that incorporates both (Mukherjee, 2015) was analysed in order to inform the development of the approach

that was used in this work. The concept of cognitive mapping (the formation of a mental map of an occurrence of phenomena in everyday life), as informed by the work of Jameson (1984) and Toscano (2012) (Toscano & Kinkle, 2015), was proposed as a tool to make ideological structures visible and reveal ideological significance within the content of AAA video games. The work of Bordwell (1985) and Light et al. (2018) was then used to justify a series of assumptions that the cognitive mapping method makes in approaching the AAA video game medium. It was established that there is a pre-existing assumption of how the AAA video game will unfold due to trends and commonalities that are present across the format. Following on from this, it could then be assumed that there could be generalisations assumed about how the player would go about engaging with the video game, from initial engagement, recognising their level of agency, and additional abilities once their play was being carried out. A cognitive mapping exercise based on these assumptions can be used to demonstrate the ideological significance of play in AAA video games.

The entrepreneurial player was a concept developed in order to highlight a process of subjectification that occurs to individuals within neoliberalism. The concept was used to demonstrate the collapse of the labour and leisure domains as the entrepreneurial self also exists in play, becoming the entrepreneurial player. This individual is still playing but their play is conducted according to the market ethic and assessed according to economic criteria as this is how time playing is justified in a neoliberal society. This form of subjectivity was used as part of the mapping of AAA video games in analysis, allowing significant ideological components to be revealed.

This form of subjectivity experienced as the entrepreneurial player and the structure of AAA video games foster these directives:

- “What can I do?”
- “How efficiently can I do it?”
- “Why am I doing this?”
- “What do I get out of this?”
- “How can I play more?”
- “How can I play better?”

These directives come about from the way in which the player initially engages with the play-space as they form their concept of identity within it, the degree of agency the player has in the play-space, and the way in which the AAA video game become a site of consumption. Each directive denotes a step in these processes of the AAA video game. The directives are designed to frame the AAA video game in economic terms, as neoliberal subjectivities would encourage. By answering the directives neoliberal ideology in the video game is made visible. The answers demonstrate if the play in AAA video games is compatible with Caillois' formal characteristics of play (being free, separate, uncertain, and unproductive (2001, p. 43)). If any of these characteristics are not met then the play in the AAA video game is corrupted.

Chapter 5 is the first in a sequence of three chapters to analyse video games, focussing on Identity. Specifically, it contained analysis in relation to the first two directives, "what can I do?" and "how efficiently can I do it?". The chapter began with a review of relevant theoretical literature on how the individual forms their sense of self and how this is affected by wider ideological structures (Butler, 2005) (Foucault, 1986) (Deleuze, 1992). The work of Bauman (2000) was also used to relate the formation of the self to neoliberal ideology. What was observed was that the individual forms their sense of self in relation to the structures around them. With the dominant structure being that of neoliberalism, the individual's identity is simultaneously destabilised and informed by the operation of neoliberal ideology. The individual forms themselves in economic terms, what they are and what they can do matters in terms of what they can offer. The video game in relation to this becomes something that needs to add to this form of identity formation.

The chapter analysed the way in which maps of *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* (2014), *Middle-earth: Shadow of War* (2017), and *Far Cry 4* (2014) let the player know what they can do and motivate certain forms of play. An analysis of the inventory menus of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018) and *Fallout 4* (2015) was also carried out as these components inform the player of what they can do and how they can do it. It was observed that players are motivated towards specific areas, ends, and encouraged to get there quickly. The fast travel mechanic was used as an example of a corrupted form of play in this regard, existing to temporally remove the player from

the play-space to move them more quickly to a productive area of the game world. Another manifestation of corrupted play in this regard is speed-running, a method of playing that reduces uncertainty in play and tailors it towards a productive end. In terms of how the player recognises themselves in the play-space, the player is not genuinely free to play as they wish; there is a lack of separation from everyday lived reality, uncertainty in play is discouraged, and play is directed towards productive ends.

Chapter 6 focussed on questions of agency and contained AAA video games analysis that related to the directives “why am I doing this?” and “what do I get out of this?”. The chapter began by studying work on the avatar (Hill, 2013) (Mukherjee, 2015) alongside a study of Richards’ (2009) approach to the video game medium. This work was used to establish an understanding of the individual’s relationship with their digital manifestation in the play-space before using the work of Althusser (2014) to establish how the video game interpellates the player as a subject of its structures.

The relevant directives in Chapter 6 relate to the degree of agency the player has in AAA video games and as such the role of non-playable characters and level progression systems were analysed, specifically in the video games *Fallout 4* (2015) and *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* (2018). These two components of video games were selected as they instruct the player on what to do whilst playing and provide a means for the player to acknowledge the product of their play. It was observed that play is motivated towards visible outputs and unproductive play is discouraged. The player is encouraged to follow the path set by the video game structure and better themselves with regards to their levelling, as their avatar would improve (become stronger, acquire perks) as their level grows. With the player anchoring their identity to this avatar they could also feel as though they were improving along with their digital manifestation, as long as they carried out the play the video game structure motivated. Grinding and farming were discussed as corrupted forms of play. These forms of play confirm the presence of neoliberal ideology in the play-space and demonstrate how entrepreneurial subjectivities are fostered. The analysis revealed that players are not generally free to play as they wish, instead being motivated to follow the desired intentionality of the video game structure. Uncertainty in the

outcomes of play is also made to appear undesirable to the player. Play is also motivated towards being productive, with the entrepreneurial player wanting their play to result in an identifiable output that allows them to justify their time spent playing. Endless play manifests here also as the entrepreneurial player can carry on playing and levelling, regardless of other feelings towards the video game, as it shows they are improving.

The thesis' final chapter focussed on AAA video games as part of the wider neoliberal ideological structure. Chapter 7 contained analysis relating to the directives "how can I play more?" and "how can I play better?". The chapter began with a review of relevant theoretical literature, and the work of Althusser (2014) was used to establish the role of ideological state apparatus in reproducing the dominant ideology in a society. The act of consumption is itself an interpellating act and carries extra significance when carried out within a play-space. The reproduction of neoliberal ideology was then centred by using Srnicek's work on platform capitalism (2017) to develop an understanding of the functioning of ideological state apparatus in the neoliberal context. This was linked this to the role of the AAA video game in a neoliberal society, which brings neoliberal ideology into the individual's play-space. AAA video games are an organ of neoliberal ideology. Virilio's (1995) (2006) and Tomlinson's (2007) work on speed was then used to emphasise the central role of speed in the operation of everyday life, and the analysis of previous chapters was used to emphasise how important playing towards something quickly is in how AAA video games encourage the player to play.

The chapter went on to analyse downloadable content in *Fallout 76* (2018), *Red Dead Redemption II* (2018) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012) and microtransactions in *FIFA 19* (2018), *Mortal Kombat X* (2015), and *Star Wars Battlefront II* (2017). Downloadable content exploits the entrepreneurial player's desire to maximise what they can do and what returns they seek from their activity. Microtransactions simultaneously exploit a desire to optimise activity, encouraging the player to value speed in their play by providing a means of arriving at returns faster. Downloadable content allows the player more activity but then microtransactions allow the player to buy back the additional time playing. This section of analysis demonstrated that neoliberal

ideology corrupts the structures of AAA video games. The prevalence of networked features and how microtransactions actions are used to satisfy the desire for instant gratification were identified as manifestations of corrupted play. Both these features of AAA video game demonstrate how deeply woven neoliberal ideology is in AAA video games, and how the act of play becomes something that reinforces neoliberal ideology by the centring of consumption. The nature of AAA video games effectively grounds the means of consumption of the play-space in a neoliberal context, disrupting the ability to separate the play from neoliberal ideology. Simultaneously, the fostering of a culture of immediacy and speed channels play towards productive ends and aims to reduce uncertainty in the outcome of play.

Limitations and Future Research

This work has been theoretical in nature in order to allow for conceptualisations on how neoliberalism could be affecting play, specifically through making use of cognitive mapping exercises. I would argue that this has produced important critical insights on the role of play within neoliberal structures, yet it was highlighted in Chapter 2 that player motivations and experiences of video games can differ vastly. With this in mind, future work that makes use of an ethnographic approach to neoliberalism and video games could test the theorisations of this work. An ethnographic approach to neoliberalism and play could produce substantial conclusions on corrupted forms of play. Observations of players playing the video games that have been analysed in Chapter 5, Chapter 6, and Chapter 7 before answering questions relating to their play. The player could themselves be asked to go through the typology for the corruption of play that was detailed in Chapter 4. A player themselves could describe whether they felt as though they were free to play as they wish, if the play was sufficiently separate from everyday reality, if the outcomes were uncertain, and if they felt it was an unproductive activity. Any potential variances to answers from players could be analysed further to establish if answers vary according to other factors, such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, or class. Additionally, the cognitive mapping exercise in itself can produce varying results from researcher to researcher. As the exercise is based on the building of a mental image

from a critical reading, texts can be read differently depending upon an individual's own beliefs and circumstance. It is highly likely that my own ideological biases are reflected in my conclusions. This same study carried out by a different person could have produced different conclusions.

A potential ethnographic study would test the validity of the conceptualisations within this work. For example, players could be asked if they feel as though the directives established in Chapter 4 are how their play is motivated. The player's actually existing play can then be held up against the play of the entrepreneurial player constructed in this work. From this, the prevalence of entrepreneurial subjectivities in play could be assessed. This could address the natural limitation of this theoretical study. The conceptual nature of the study cannot account for the myriad ways in which unique individuals, and their unique set of circumstances, approach each session of play of AAA video game. Due to limitations on time, resources, and scope of this study the form of ethnographic study detailed above could not be carried out alongside conceptualisations. This work, however, could provide the basis for future ethnographic studies.

Another natural limitation of the study relates to the AAA video game medium itself. AAA video games change and adapt as technology and trends advance. This work in this study is, especially, relevant to the seventh and eighth generation of console video games, but it is not possible to establish how relevant it will be to the forthcoming ninth and tenth generations.

There has already been speculation that the tenth generation of video games will be drastically different. The Vice President of Publishing of Psyonix (a popular video game developer) stated that "streaming will be a powerful force over the next ten years and will likely completely take over the console market in the generation after the next one (i.e. the Tenth Generation)" (cited in Williams, 2018). This observation was made in relation to the development of streaming consoles.⁶⁸ It was speculated

⁶⁸ A digital platform that streams video games via the internet rather than the player owning a digital or physical copy of a video game on their own console. These consoles would work in a similar way to Netflix and Amazon Prime.

in 2018 by a long-running video game news site that the next generation of video game consoles would see the release of what is known as streaming consoles, with video games being offered to the player via a monthly subscription fee (Williams, 2018).

Such a way of playing video games already has a limited release, that being Google's *Stadia* platform. An article on media news and content site Polygon stated that *Stadia* has the potential to be 'the death knell of everything we know about console games', maybe even end hardware console generation cycles (Campbell & Plante, 2019). Google, in their own advertising for the console show Ancient Greek pottery depicting a game, Roman arenas, historical archive footage of golf (likely from the early twentieth century), and the building of contemporary sports stadiums before showing clips of people playing video games and introducing *Stadia* (Google, 2019). Google Vice President Phil Harrison explicitly stated that, for Google, *Stadia* is seen as "the direction of travel for the futures of games" (cited in Campbell & Plante, 2019). Whether this will be the case is too soon to tell. It is clear, however, the video game industry is moving in this direction, with streaming at its core. The *PlayStation 4* and the *Xbox One* both offer an app that gives access to a library of video games that can be streamed for a subscription fee.⁶⁹ I personally own a *PlayStation 4* and the PlayStation Now app was installed on my console during an update without me requesting it. I have also received numerous promotional offers about its use so it would seem it is a service that is being pushed.

There is something more culturally alarming about the potential proliferation of streaming consoles. A potential scenario for many is that they carry out unstable work, in unstable accommodation, with a shifting basis for how they form their identity, and now their means of leisure will also be unstable. Profession, housing, identity, and leisure would all effectively be borrowed and conditional. A sense of ownership is absent for many within neoliberalism, and this has the possibility to extend to not owning the games that allow for play. I would argue this produces a set of conditions that simply is not sustainable with regards to human health and

⁶⁹ On the *PlayStation 4* an app called 'PlayStation Now' offers a streaming service and on the *Xbox One* the app is known as the 'Xbox Game Pass'.

happiness. It would be a further demonstration of the barriers to work being dismantled within neoliberal ideology as the physical and moral needs of individuals are relegated to notions of productivity, with these needs only being addressed if it leads to them becoming a better worker. If this scenario were to develop then it would require future research and the conceptualisations in this work could be made use of as well as being updated in relation to technological and societal change.

Ultimately, the corruption of play in AAA video games is part of a wider process of neoliberalisation. This process includes the fostering of entrepreneurial subjectivities and the intensification of work. It is essential that this process is opposed otherwise the act of play will stop serving as a barrier to everyday life and market forces. If play loses this function then it also stops functioning as a form of leisure that can provide meaningful experiences, as to provide this it needs to be an activity thoroughly separate from everyday reality. If the player is still grounded in wider neoliberal structures, they will have to reconcile their play with it rather than using it to think and act in non-neoliberal ways. Future work can theorise on how play within neoliberal structures could potentially resist neoliberal influence, and how the play-space itself could potentially be removed from neoliberal structures in order to serve as an entirely separate space, regaining its potential to provide a myriad of meaningful experiences.

Ludography

AdVenture Capitalist (2014) Developed by Hyper Hippo Productions. Publisher *Kongregate Inc.; Screenzilla; Hyper Hippo Productions*

Assassin's Creed Odyssey (2018) Developed by Ubisoft Quebec. Publisher *Ubisoft*

Assassin's Creed Syndicate (2015) Developed by Ubisoft Quebec. Publisher *Ubisoft*

Assassin's Creed Unity (2014) Developed by Ubisoft Montreal. Publisher *Ubisoft*

Battlefield 1 (2016) Developed by EA DICE. Publisher *Electronic Arts (EA)*

Battlefield V (2018) Developed by EA DICE. Publisher *Electronic Arts (EA)*

Bioshock Infinite (2013) Developed by Irrational Games. Publisher *2k Games*

Bloodborne (2015) Developed by FromSoftware. Publisher *Sony Computer Entertainment*

Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare (2014) Developed by Sledgehammer Games. Publisher *Activision*

Call of Duty: Black Ops 4 (2018) Developed by Treyarch. Publisher *Activision*

Cyberpunk 2077 (2020) Developed by CD Projekt Red. Publisher *CD Projekt*

Dark Souls (2011) Developed by FromSoftware. Publisher *Namco Bandai Games, JP: FromSoftware*

Dark Souls II (2014) Developed by FromSoftware. Publisher *Namco Bandai Games, JP: FromSoftware*

Dark Souls III (2016) Developed by FromSoftware. Publisher *Namco Bandai Entertainment, JP: FromSoftware*

Demon Souls (2009) Developed by FromSoftware. Publisher *JP: Sony Computer Entertainment, NA: Atlus USA, PAL: Namco Bandai Games*

Doom (2016) Developed by id Software. Publisher *Bethesda Softworks*

Dota 2 (2013) Developed by Valve. Publisher *Valve*

Dr Kawashima's Brain Training: How Old Is Your Brain? (2005) Developed by Nintendo SPD. Publisher *Nintendo*

eFootball Pro Evolution Soccer 2020 (2019) Developed by PES Productions. Publisher *Konami*

Fallout 4 (2015) Developed by Bethesda Game Studios. Publisher *Bethesda Softworks*

Fallout 76 (2018) Developed by Bethesda Game Studios. Publisher *Bethesda Softworks*

Far Cry 4 (2014) Developed by Ubisoft Montreal. Publisher *Ubisoft*

FIFA 09 (2008) Developed by EA Canada. Publisher *EA Sports*

FIFA 18 (2017) Developed by EA Sports Vancouver, EA Sports Romania. Publisher *EA Sports*

FIFA 19 (2018) Developed by EA Sports Vancouver, EA Sports Romania. Publisher *EA Sports*

Fortnite (2017) Developed by Epic Games. Publisher *Epic Games; Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment*

Grand Theft Auto IV (2008) Developed by Rockstar North. Publisher *Rockstar Games*

Grand Theft Auto V (2013) Developed by Rockstar North. Publisher *Rockstar Games*

Gwent: The Witcher Card Game (2018) Developed by CD Projekt Red. Publisher *CD Projekt*

Heavy Rain (2010) Developed by Quantic Dream. Publisher *Sony Computer Entertainment*

League of Legends (2009) Developed by Riot Games. Publisher *Riot Games*

Mass Effect 3 (2012) Developed by BioWare. Publisher *Electronic Arts (EA)*

Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater (2004) Developed by Konami Computer Entertainment Japan. Publisher *Konami*

Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor (2014) Developed by Monolith Productions. Publisher Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

Middle-earth: Shadow of War (2017) Developed by Monolith Productions. Publisher Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

Minecraft (2011) Developed by Mojang. Publisher Mojang; Microsoft Studios (2014)

Minecraft: Dungeons (2020) Developed by Mojang. Publisher Xbox Game Studios

Minecraft: Story Mode (2015) Developed by Telltale Games. Publisher Telltale Games

Mortal Kombat (1992) Developed by Midway. Publisher Midway

Mortal Kombat X (2015) Developed by NetherRealm Studios. Publisher Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment

NBA 2K18 (2017) Developed by Visual Concepts. Publisher 2K Sports

Night Driver (1976) Developed by Atari, Inc. Publisher Atari, Inc.

Pac-Man (1982) Developed by Atari, Inc. Publisher Atari, Inc.

Red Dead Redemption II (2018) Developed by Rockstar Studios. Publisher Rockstar Games

Rygar (1987) Developed by Tecmo. Publisher Tecmo

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice (2019) Developed by FromSoftware. Publisher Activision; JP: FromSoftware

Space Invaders (1978) Developed by Taito. Publisher JP: Taito, NA: Midway, AU: Leisure & Allied Industries, Atari, Inc.

Spec Ops: The Line (2012) Developed by Yager Development. Publisher 2K Games

Star Wars Battlefront II (2017) Developed by EA DICE. Publisher Electronic Arts (EA)

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (2011) Developed by Bethesda Game Studios. Publisher Bethesda Softworks

The Last of Us (2013) Developed by Naughty Dog. Publisher *Sony Computer Entertainment*

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (1998) Developed by Nintendo EAD. Publisher *Nintendo*

The McDonald's Videogame (2006) Developed by La Molleindustria. Publisher *La Molleindustria*

The Sims (2000) Developed by Maxis; Edge of Reality. Publisher *Electronic Arts (EA)*

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015) Developed by CD Projekt Red. Publisher *CD Projekt*

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves (2009) Developed by Naughty Dog. Publisher *Sony Computer Entertainment*

Until Dawn (2015) Developed by Supermassive Games. Publisher *Sony Computer Entertainment*

Video Olympics (1977) Developed by Atari, Inc. Publisher *Atari, Inc.*

Watch Dogs (2014) Developed by Ubisoft Montreal. Publisher *Ubisoft*

World of Warcraft (2004) Developed by Blizzard Entertainment. Publisher *Blizzard Entertainment*

XCOM 2 (2016) Developed by Firaxis Games. Publisher *2K Games*

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