Enstranging Play: Distinguishing Playful Subjecthood from Governance

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Abstract

How to theorize the subject of play? The modern field of game studies knows two paradoxical ontologies of the subject of the player. One tradition regards the 'rehearsal' of subject positions within ludic structures as a construction of Althusserian interpellated subjects (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Another tradition regards players as principially demystifying (Friedman, 1995) or deconstructing agents (Raessens, 2011) that, through playing, dismantle the game along with any seductive ideology or bias.

My presentation works through this paradox with the aid of Miguel Sicart's 'skin-subject,' and Michel Foucault's concept of governance in order to provide a model of the subject of play as one necessarily split between the played, playing and player-subject. Firstly, philosopher and game scholar Miguel Sicart proposes a perspective on games as spaces of morality in which the player can be present. This presence of the player does not fully correlate with the player as moral subject, but is rather a "skin-subject in contact with the world outside the game, which in return does have influence over how a player experiences a certain game" (2009, 102). Already, we may distinguish in this skin-subject the played entity of the avatar among the other presented content of the game; and distinguish it from the person outside of the game. As a case study, Galactic Café's *The Stanley Parable* (2007, 2013) proves a case in point: the game takes a lot of effort to rhetorically differentiate these distinct subjects within the context of the game.

Such a playing, or controlling entity is often lauded as essentially autonomous, due to the freedom granted by interactive media. Already in the early 21st century this concept of 'interactivity' was problematized (cf. Aarseth, 1997; Raessens, 2005). Indeed, player behaviour is to a large extent meaningful only in that it is necessitated through the game's ruleset and possible world: its presented affordances, constraints and goals amount to what is commonly called a ludic contract (Pratt, 2010) or lusory attitude (Suits, 1978, 35), a certain surrender to the fiction and goals of the game. The mechanism by which ludic structures function as governing structures is akin to a Foucaultian model of power relations. Much like the way in which power structures are prerequisites for the subject, a ludic structure provides a pre-requisite for the voluntarily subjectification of the playing-subject.

A final reason to further differentiate the subject of play is that the playing-subject is inevitably separate from the player-subject: the ludoliterate player behind the interface. The case study of Yager Development's *Spec Ops: the Line* (2012) shows that it is necessary to

distinguish the playing-subject's actions as necessitated by a ludic contract (until broken); and the player (or interpreting) subject as a classical reader capable of reflection. A reading of *Spec Ops* will reveal the distance between the split subjectivities of the subject of play as one that is both necessary and generative of meaning. This constellation – akin to narratological accounts of literature as spear-headed by Genette and, specifically, Mieke Bal (1985) – provides a methodology to adequately theorize the subjecthood of the player and their freedom within a ludic structure. Additionally, it provides a method to engage in close-readings of digital games such as *Spec Ops: the Line* and their possibilities of engaging in critical reflection through mechanics of Brechtian *Verfremdung*.

Keywords

Subjecthood, Governance, Foucault, Benjamin, Brecht

Introduction

> "I don't understand. How on earth are you making meaningful choices? What did you— —*wait a second*. Did I just see, no that's not possible. I can't believe it. How had I not noticed it sooner? You're not Stanley. You're a real person!"
>
> – Narrator (*The Stanley Parable*, Galactic Café, 2013)

When the narrator of *The Stanley Parable* realizes that the plot he was laboriously narrating was all this time acted out by a human player behind a computer, he is suitably astonished. After all, digital games may depend on an audience able to act – but that player's actions are still limited by script. Why, then, can it seem even remotely astonishing that *The Stanley Parable* reflects on this lack of freedom? I propose that this is because of a fundamental tension in participatory media that games often wilfully ignore: while the promise of interactivity may be a promise of freedom, even the briefest contemplation shows us that the explorable options making up this freedom are limited and, perhaps more disillusioning, pre-programmed. Yet, grammatically speaking, games *seem* to be particularly first-person experiences. *I* might take pride in completing *America's Army*'s basic training (United States Army 2002), or gravely remember the moment I walked Martin Walker, in slow-motion, through desert dunes filled with hundreds of still-burning bodies in *Spec Ops: the Line* after a white phosphorus attack (Yager Development 2012). But who is that *I*, and to what extent can I be, at once, the person playing a game as well as being Martin Walker, traversing the Dubai desert? How is this subject split and how do these subjectivities relate? In order to define the *I* of the digital game-playing-subject, I ask:

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

I will start by reiterating two traditions through which the gaming subject has frequently been theorized: an interpellationary and a deconstructivist model. Second, I will look at Miguel

Sicart's attempt at bridging these two positions by describing a player-subject in a Foucaultian model of power relations that articulates how the game-as-structure brings into being a specific player-subject. I will, however, problematize Sicart's concept of the 'player-subject' as a unified, stable subject separate from the 'playing' self. My case study will serve partly as a counter-example, as *The Stanley Parable* thematizes reflection to address the difference between the playing-subject and the avatar through which the player is present within the diegesis of the game. Departing from Sicart's player-subject I will re-define the split subject of digital game-play on the basis of Ernst van Alphen's ideological subject in language. There, I turn to *Spec Ops'* interplay between game and player in order to indicate the critical potential of digital game-play by enstranging its subjects.

Interpellation versus Deconstruction

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

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

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

By going along with the proposed behaviour of the system, by following the rules of the game, the naive player-subject necessarily follows the system's proposed world view, or so the argument goes. Marxist academics Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter go so far as to say that interactivity "[rather] intensifies the sense of free will necessary for ideology to work really well. Players, of their own choice, rehearse socially stipulated subjectivities" (2009: 192).

We may recognize, in this line of reasoning, a presumed merger of the player and the diegetic character into a single, stable subject. Completely caught up in the illusion of agency, players lose themselves in the game-proposed roles as "consumer, commander, commanded, cyborg, criminal" and other such "subject positions" (ibid.). The process of this identification is theorized by Dyer-Witheford through Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's concept of

interpellation. The process of interpellation, as coined in Althusser's 1969 essay "Idéologie et Appareils Idéologiques d'Etat" entails that ideological practice constitutes individuals as subjects (696) through a social practice of being 'hailed' or interpellated into specific subject positions (699). By being hailed as, say, a father, a hard-working labourer or a lawyer, we acquire our identities through ideology. An ideology that, additionally, has a material existence (695) in that the 'ideas' of a human subject exist in his actions (695-96). Any individual or collective idea of who we are is, according to Althusser's theoretical framework, a consequence of adopting, through material practice – in this case playing a digital game – "the subject position proposed for us by [societal] discourse" (Fiske 1987: 53).

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

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

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

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

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

While, on one hand, then, an interpellational model of gameplay assumes that players are 'hailed' completely into the subject position offered by immersive games; a deconstructivist model proposes that players are wholly detached critics that deconstruct games' systems as a quintessential way of engaging with and understanding them. As with every simplification of academic debate, these positions are necessarily exaggerated,[1] but I take them to be representative of two wholly alternative ways of theorizing the player-subject that make far-reaching assumptions about the distinction between players and the fictional worlds they interact with.

Games as Foucaultian Power Structures

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

Rather than being mutually exclusive, the ideological-paradigmatic game-as-structure and the deconstructing player-as-subject are in a dialectical relationship, producing what Miguel Sicart terms the 'player-subject' within the game. Sicart argues that it is the relation *between* game and player that produces the player-subject. He connects the game-as-object – as set of rules – to the player-subject by viewing the former as a power structure in a Foucaultian sense. Much like the way in which power structures are prerequisites for the subject, he argues, "the game as an object is a prerequisite for the being of the player" (Sicart 2009: 67).

Sicart's player-subject is characterized by two properties which I will treat below. First, as mentioned, Sicart's player-subject is produced in a process of voluntary subjectivization akin to Foucaultian power structures. This theoretical framework addresses the relationship between the game-as-structure and the player-subject, as well as providing a productive way of thinking the phenomenology of digital play as adopting and experiencing a temporary subjectivity. A second property of Sicart's player-subject is its status as a 'skin-subject,' whose relationship is unclear to other subjectivities – specifically to subjecthood outside of the game.

"Playing a computer game," for Sicart, "is an act of subjectivization, a process that creates a subject connected to the rules of the game" (63). He uses the term subject in both Michel

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[1] We need only look at the caricatural positions used to describe the narratology-ludology debate, or the more recent procedurality-playcentrism debate: in the end it proves near impossible to point to any scholars wholly identified with one of these poles (cf. Frasca 2003; Lederle-Ensign 2013). In the case of my 'deconstructivist' model, for example, Raessens nuances Friedman's absolute characterization of gameplay as demystifying by suggesting that a large number of players may be perfectly content "staying at the surface of the fiction [...] as opposed to the previous in-depth deconstruction" (Raessens 2005: 378).

Foucault's meanings of the word: as "subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge" (Foucault 2001: 331). How does this subjectivization process work in the context of digital games?

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

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

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

In the case of a player maintained as a subject capable of action within the set of rules offered up by the game, that power relation rests on the instrument of consent. On the basis of this instrumental role of consent, Sicart argues for the necessity of recognizing the voluntary nature of player-subjectivity – indeed, "the exercise of power can never do without [violence or consent], often both at the same time" (Foucault 2001: 340-41). I would like to additionally draw attention to Foucault's use of the words 'conduct' (playing on (*se*) *conduire*, to lead/drive; as well as to conduct oneself, to behave) and 'government,' in the way that a political structure can govern as well as in the way "in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed" (341). A way to envision how games can function as rulesets generative of subjects is by thinking of them as governing or conducting those player-subjects, which "is to structure the possible field of action of others" (ibid.). Rather than violence (which I consider irrelevant to most cases of digital play) or voluntary contracts

(which Sicart takes as defining in the case of digital play [2009: 68]), it is government that Foucault considers "the relationship proper to power" (Foucault 2001: 341).

As a type of freely adopted governing institution, then, the power structure of a game's rules 'produces' a player-subject: "the game's ontological nature initially defines the ontological position of its subjects, the players, [in that it] establishes the starting point for the process of subjectivization that takes place in the act of playing a game" (Sicart 2009: 68). The 'ontological nature' of a game is, for Sicart "as a system of rules that create and are experienced through game worlds" (47). Yet how does a system of rules produce a subject and define its initial ontological position?

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

There are some problems with this process. The player-subject for Sicart is generated in a power structure, created as "a subset of our being as multiple subject" (73). But this subjecthood, particular to each game, assumes a faithfulness to the governing principles in order to *be*. It ends when the player stops playing or does not abide to the principles of play – in Sicart's terms, when it does not show fidelity to the game's "affordances and constraints" (102). In fact, "not being faithful to the rules implies not being faithful to the event, and therefore losing the ontological status of subject" for Sicart (71). In his example, to stop playing a game like *Custer's Revenge* (Mystique 1982), which features rape as its primary goal, is to "immediately suspend the player-subjectivity" and revert to one's "*own* personal and cultural values" (103, emphasis added). The example is one that rejects a moral perversion: the player-subject, which we might remember as a subset of "our being as multiple subject" (73), is rejected by "[the] cultural and moral being" (63) of which it is a subset. There is, for Sicart, an implicit super-subject: one's 'own' subject as an autonomous individual playing the game – made up of a set of personal and cultural values – that is, to Sicart, outside of the push and pull of power relations.

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

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

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

Stanley Decides for Himself Now

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

> He had been at his desk for nearly an hour when he realized that not one single order had arrived on the monitor for him to follow. No-one had shown up to give him instructions […] Something was very clearly wrong. Shocked, frozen solid, Stanley found himself unable to move for the longest time. But as he came to his wits and regained his senses, he got up from his desk and stepped out of his office. (ibid.)

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

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

If we do allow the player-subject to be created by submitting to the rules of the game, *The Stanley Parable*'s branching narrative forces us to acknowledge a difference between the 'skin' we are adopting (i.e. that of Stanley) and ourselves as controllers of that skin. This problematizes Sicart's skin-subject as entirely subsumed under the 'multiple subject' of the player: characters like Stanley have a determinate background story, a gender, a visual representation and so on. Even in a game such as the *Parable* where all the choices are made by a player who does not relinquish this control (as we will see in *Spec Ops: the Line,* and can acknowledge in any game employing cinematic cut scenes), there is a split between the character *played* and the subject *playing*. *The Stanley Parable* plays on this, for example when suggesting the player quit the game in order to save Stanley from dying in a large crushing machine; or when acknowledging, as cited in the introductory citation, that Stanley is someone fundamentally different from the player, but instead "a real person" (2013). This rhetoric is underlined visually under certain conditions, when another ending has been completed first. Reaching the area with the two doors again, the player will 'leave' Stanley both in terms of control and of perspective – leaving him ungoverned and motionless (Figure 1). As the credits roll, the narrator worries about Stanley's inability to act, unable to decide for himself.

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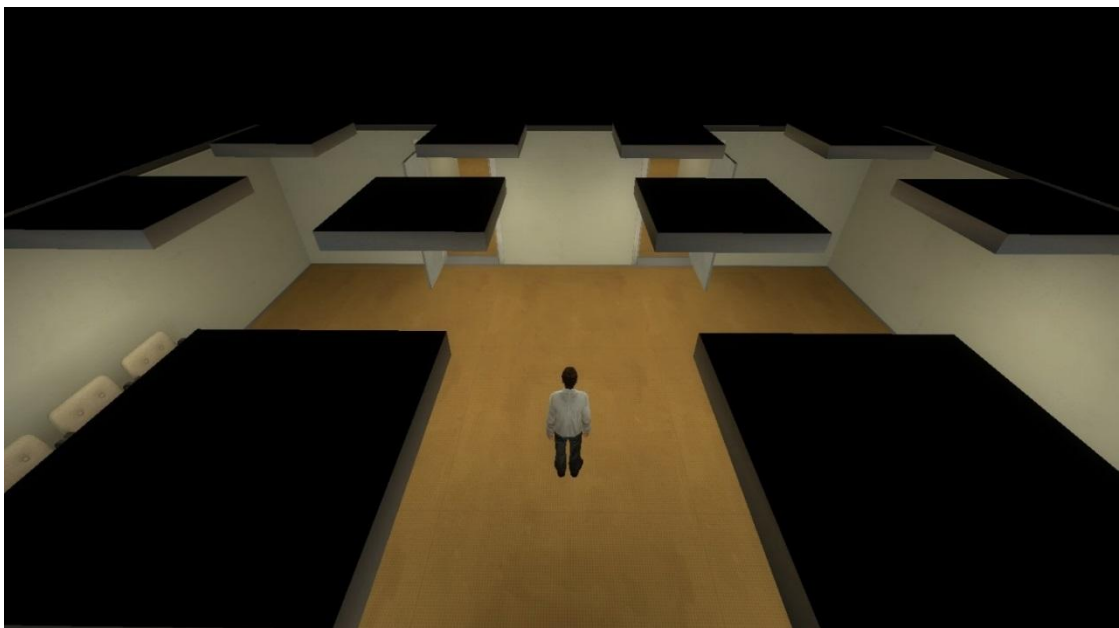
The Split Subject

A subject generated through digital play, then, is a subject partly created in the power structure of a game's world. It is, furthermore, a subject with a variable but distinguishable relation to the subject depicted in the game. Both of these, additionally, should be distinguished from a ludoliterate subject outside of the game. As a whole we may recognize and distinguish the subject behind the computer (what *the Stanley Parable*'s narrator called "a real person"); a subject present and acting within the game under its lusory attitude; and a subject that is controlled and has its own representation (e.g. Stanley).

I argue for a recognition of this player-subject as the split subject of the external player or 'interpreting-subject' behind the computer; the 'playing-subject' in a mediated presence of the game; and the 'played-subject' or 'interpreted-subject' which we control, to which we relinquish control at the whim of narrative.

I base these subject positions within the multi-subject of the player on Ernst van Alphen's analytical distinction between three ideological-linguistic subjects. Van Alphen introduces the interpreting-, speaking- and interpreted-subject (1987: 28). The interpreting-subject 'interprets' in the sense that "it constrains the possible significations" of a text – the reader, or, within a text and within narratology, the focalizer, or the instance whose position readers align themselves with (28-29).[2] The speaking subject is a "spokesman of a text, the implicit or explicit 'I' that expresses [its] signs" (ibid.)[3] – the narrator in literature or cinema. The interpreted-subject can be the theme, the subject of the text in the sense of its *topic*, or a character (29).[4] Cultural theorist Mieke Bal, whose terminology van Alphen bases himself on, differentiates in her *Narratology* (1985) between the "abstract *actor* and the more specific term *character*," where the latter is rather an anthropomorphic figure: "more often than not a character resembles a human being and an actor need not necessarily do so" (114). I will leave this specification aside for now, rather moving on to an elaboration of these three subjects: the interpreting, speaking and interpreted-subjects of van Alphen.

The *interpreting-subject* of ideology for van Alphen can be located in a reader or decoder the external aspect of the text or communicative situation that constrains the possibilities of signification (55).[5] When stating that the interpreting-subject in the case of the digital player constrains the possible significations of a text, through conventions, the knowledge thereof is akin to a 'ludoliteracy,' a familiarity with the coded conventions of (digital) play (cf. Zagal 2010: 23). Based on the knowledge of these conventions, playful situations are understood in the same sense that texts are understood: through knowledge of earlier play. The interpreting-subject's knowledge of other games necessarily informs the playing-subject in order to

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[2] "Het interpreterend subject is die instantie die de mogelijke betekenissen inperkt. In de verteltheorie wordt dit aspect de *focalisator* genoemd (Bal 1985). Dit is de instantie door wiens ogen we als lezer meekijken" (van Alphen 1987: 28-29).

[3] "de woordvoerder van een tekst, de impliciete of expliciete 'ik' die de tekens uit" (van Alphen 1987: 28).

[4] "Het geïnterpreteerde subject kan het thema, het *onderwerp* van de tekst maar ook een personage zijn" (van Alphen 1987: 29).

[5] "het interpreterend subject [is] dat aspect van de tekst of van de communicatiesituatie dat de vele betekenismogelijkheden inperkt" (van Alphen 1987: 55).

recognize such conventions as health bars, genres and so on. As Sicart relates: "as a cultural being that has been playing games since a very early age I have developed a repertoire that allows me to identify patterns of rules and apply them" in order to understand "what my actions in the game" as a playing-subject "were supposed to be" (2009: 65).

As for the *playing-subject*, it is problematic to apply the speaking subject or narrator directly to either the game-as-structure, or the choices made by the players within that structure. Within the rules, the playing-subject 'speaks'. In other words: the playing-subject is the implicit *I* that produces the signs of an ergodic text,[6] causing the expression of game's code – here, in the concrete sense of programming and as the coded conventions to be (re-)interpreted by the interpreting-subject. There is, then, already a dialectic emerging between them: the ludoliterate interpreting-subject reads the codes of the game, informing the choices as a playing-subject, thus actualizing the game through play. In turn, those choices change the state of the game, leading to a re-interpretation, a further actualization and so on. The function of speaking (or expression) in the case of digital games is shared by the playing-subject (of the multi-subject of myself as a player) and the game's governing structure in a two-step actualization. Insofar as interpretation is only possible *after* expression, the playing-subject and the auctorial organization are at the basis of digital game-play's speaking subject – presenting the codes for interpretation. Only through interaction of the playing-subject speaking *with* the code does game-play come to expression – using the term interaction not as 'participation' by the player (Raessens 2005: 379-380), but exactly in the sense of *inter-* (between, among) and *āctiō* (acting, speaking, conducting): speaking or action between each other ["inter-" and "action," *OED Online* 2014]).

The *interpreted-subject*, for van Alphen, is equivalent to the socially constructed meaning of a text (1987: 57), which I take to be as constructed or understood by the interpreting-subject through the conventions known by the interpreting-subject.[7] In one instance, van Alphen gives characters within the text (in the shape of represented, fictional, subjects) as a type of interpreted-subject within linguistic structures (29); another example is that of the subject *matter* of the text, its 'theme,' 'substance,' meaning or signification (58).[8] The state of this subject is ambiguous, even for van Alphen: it can only be called a subject in a vision of semiosis that takes the text as the origin of meaning as opposed to the *result* of meaning (in a more Barthesian sense). Alternatively, then, the interpreted-subject is rather an object (29): the presented content offered by the auctorial organization of the game.

I choose, rather, to make the distinction of the interpreted-subject as the fictional subject represented in the game, which is malleable and controllable by the playing-subject but nonetheless designed and essentially unchangeable. This played-subject is that of the avatar

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[6] An ergodic text is one that requires "non-trivial effort [...] to traverse the text," a neologism from *ergon* (work) and *hodos* (path) (Aarseth, 1997, 1). That is to say, the playing subject exerts non-trivial effort on interactive texts, digital games and so on by navigating its possible world in the broadest sense – for the sake of comparison: the trivial effort of a 'nonergodic' text is flipping pages, moving eyes across a page and so on (Aarseth, 1997, 1-2).

[7] " De sociale betekenis [...] van een tekst is nu het ' geïnterpreteerde subject' zoals dat door de toepassing van al dan niet ideologische codes tot stand gekomen is" (van Alphen 1987: 57).

[8] My translation of "het *onderwerp* van de tekst, zijn 'thema', 'stof' of 'betekenis' (van Alphen 1987: 58).

representing a character (Lara Croft, Nathan Drake, Martin Walker); the avatar and camera of third-person configurations whom we lose control over – who acts, in other words, as a cinematic subject or visual narrator: not interpreting, not playing, but to be played and interpreted.

Based on the above, I recognize the player-subject as syntactically split between the *I* of the interpreting-subject, behind the computer or the interface, which constrains the possible significations of a text and informs the playing-subject based on knowledge of ludic conventions. The playing-subject is the implicit *I* that produces the signs of an ergodic text within the possibility space of the governing game-as-structure. The played (interpreted) subject is the represented subject, the 'skin-subject' in Sicart: the objective avatar through which the playing-subject is present. Yet the avatar in itself is a character, a represented object to be interpreted. Below, I shall untangle these separately in the case of *Spec Ops: the Line*'s specific configuration of subjects. As I will argue, the game structurally frustrates attempts to unify these subjects, instead enstranging them from each other.

Me/Playing/Walker

The narrator of *The Stanley Parable* was shocked upon learning that the interpreting-subject is a 'real person:' someone behind a computer, entirely distinct from the character Stanley. I recognized, there, a fundamental tension between the playing-subject and the played-subject experienced as different entities: I am merely controlling Stanley while I am playing the game. *Spec Ops: the Line* engages with this same paradox by presenting the player with a strong, identifiable lead character, but enstranging the playing-subject from this played-subject, Martin Walker. This, in turn, confronts the interpreting-subject with the playing-subject's compliance to ludic conventions.

I will argue, below, that *Spec Ops the Line* depends on a sufficiently literate interpreting-subject, while demanding (through its constraints and affordances) the playing-subject to follow the global-political genre conventions of the third person shooter. A ludonarrative dissonance is created by demanding the playing-subject to kill for selfish reasons and to use unethical means of military intervention, while the game's played-subject reflects on the ludic actions of the playing-subject.[9] While the playing-subject follows the orders of its ludic structure, a schizophrenic situation is created: the interpreting-subject is enstranged from the actions on the screen, inciting criticism or the desire to quit the ludic contract.

Yager Development's *Spec Ops: the Line* (2012) is, ostensibly, the most generic shooter imaginable. Everything about it is set up to conform to the conventions of block-buster shooting games: its cinematic opening scene *in medias res* (a helicopter dog fight over a ruined Dubai); its semi-first person configuration (oscillating between point-of-view and over-the-shoulder shooting as in blockbusters *Gears of War* [Epic Games 2006] and

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[9] Game designer Clint Hocking coined the term to describe the effect of "throwing the narrative and ludic elements of the work [a game] into opposition" (2007, 256). More colloquially: the 'story' of a game asks the player to do something that does not fit, or contradicts, its possible or required behaviour.

Uncharted); its setting of American foreign military intervention (as in *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* [Infinity Ward 2009]; *America's Army*); even its main character's voice actor Nolan North (as in the *Uncharted* series, *Assassin's Creed* series and many games in the *Call of Duty* series). As one blogger has pointedly stated: "Spec Ops occurs in the ruins of Dubai. There is a desert. There are people to shoot. So anybody who has played an FPS should feel right at home" (Calhoun 2014).

Thus, the role is perfectly familiar to the reasonably experienced player: they play Cpt. Martin Walker who sets out to rescue Col. John Konrad in a narrative similar to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899): Konrad has defected and set up an autonomous anarchic commune amidst an orientalised, fearsome Dubai swept by sandstorms. Yet, as the game progresses, its played-subject problematizes the straightforward discourse of American exceptionalism and military glorification of many blockbuster series such as *Gears of War* or *Call of Duty* – in part through its glaring allusions to *Heart of Darkness*[10] and ubiquity of Vietnam era protest music.[11] That is not to say that there are not players who simply ignore its glaring allusions. For each reviewer, commenter or friend that lauds the game's subversion of convention there is a commenter or friend that "will play the game as a generic third-person shooter and take away little more than that" (Keogh 2012: 4). As game scholar Brendan Keogh notes, he spent time repeatedly watching a YouTube video series to check his references: "the player that produced these videos spent much of the time trash-talking the NPCs and revelling in the violence with hardly a moment's reflection" (ibid.). Important as this is to note, it is also perhaps all the more reason to stress the role of individual interpretation separate from the actions performed in play.

The formal game design choice I will focus on is explicitly a manifestation of the distinction between the interpreting, playing and played-subjects. At one pivotal moment in the game, the played-subject Martin Walker is confronted with numerous defected American soldiers. Walker is unambiguously a played-subject here, acting, speaking and deciding regardless of any input: our presence during this cut scene is minimized to a disembodied presence through the visual narrator (i.e. a cinematic camera gazes upon an autonomous avatar). He, Walker, is here grammatically a third person. Conveniently, the game provides a solution to the uneven battle in the form of a mortar carrying white phosphorous bombs. One of Walker's team mates protests, but Walker insists that there is no choice, which, indeed, the game's rule-set enforces. That is to say, after regaining control the playing-subject has no choice but to use white phosphorus as the only way to progress in the game, despite the chemical's unclear legal and ethical status (MacLeod and Rogers 2007) and recent controversial uses by the United States Army (Spinner et al. 2004).

While a playing-subject exists within the lusory contract that demands the player progress by using the chemical weapon, the game does something interesting to enstrange the interpreting-

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[10] For the connection to Heart of Darkness and its cinematic adaptation *Apocalypse Now* (1979) see Payne (2014); Hamilton (2012); Brendan Keogh's book-length close-reading of the game (2012) or Lejacq (2012), in which the developers confirm their intention. For a concise overview of "*Spec Ops: The Line*'s Conventional Subversion of the Military Shooter" see Keogh (2013).

[11] I noted, among others, Jimi Hendrix, (diegetic instances of) Deep Purple and Martha and the Vandellas as well as present-day protest music including the Black Angels.

subject from the playing-subject. Firing the mortar bombs is done by first shooting a camera up in the air with a parachute, and then aiming the mortar strikes through a screen relaying the camera's view. As the player does so, the game repeats one of its recurring tropes: the player sees Walker's reflection and – in turn – their own reflection as an interpreting-subject on the TV screen displaying the game.[12]

This uncovering of the split nature of the player is a schizophrenic moment to be understood as an 'enstrangement' from the actions and convictions of the playing and played-subject, or "one could just as well say: to *make them strange* [*verfremden*]" (Benjamin, 1939, 18, original emphasis). I choose the term enstrangement as a translation of *Verfremdung*, here, because of the linguistic, historical and conceptual origin of Brecht's term in the Russian Formalists' *ostranenie*. Again, the function of enstrangement is that one can be made re-aware of (cognitively) familiar circumstances – such as the heavily familiarized conventions of digital gaming's war genres – and objects by presenting them in a new (or 'strange') fashion (Shklovsky, 1929, 6). Hence, a convention so familiar so as to appear natural must be enstranged to once more draw attention toward it – such as the social convention of, say, the American working class to labour for minimum wages without guarantee of health care and little social security; or Muslim women being subordinate to the will of their husbands and male kin. Or the shooter's genre convention of ruthlessly brutal American foreign intervention against a stateless terrorist other.

In this moment the game presents a doubly enstranged experience. It reminds the interpreting-subject of their otherness to the played-subject: the fact that they are controlling an avatar with a specific background story, visual representation and goals. *And* it reminds the interpreting-subject of their otherness to the playing-subject: that the choices taken are finite and pre-programmed according to the developer as co-speaking subject. Both of these, I argue, are taken for granted in moment-to-moment digital play. Such an astonishment – particularly within the concatenation of *Spec Ops'* more subtle enstrangements from violent games' conventions – may serve to remind the player of the material reality of these situations. These more subtle enstrangements aim to remind the player similarly of his split subjectivity: literal reflections in mirrors or liquids; requests by other characters to quit the game; the loading screen asking *you* how many soldiers you have killed.

In a complete formulation: by disrupting the identification of *Spec Ops'* stable embodied presence, the effect of enstrangement allows the interpreting-subject of the player to distantiate itself in a critical attitude that allows a recognition of the depicted rule-governed activities of the playing-subject under the ludic contract. More colloquially, in my case I was reminded that I had effortlessly identified with Cpt. Walker – certainly not the first Western soldier-avatar that I had controlled in the process of killing thousands of stateless (or even outer-space alien) terrorist actors. I had suspended the split between myself behind the computer, my actions within the game and the character whose role I was partly enacting (**Error! Reference source not found.**). By disrupting my identification – showing both the otherness of my avatar and my own act of playing – the game reminded me of this split, the

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[12] One might, perhaps ironically, state that the anti-glare technology increasingly present in modern-day monitors is a great hinderance to the potential for the video game medium as a potent site for meaning creation.

quasi-natural conventional nature of the situation and its likeness to white phosphorus attacks such as those in Fallujah.

As Brendan Keogh notes in his excellent close-reading of *Spec Ops*, "there is a loading screen tip towards the end of the game, when Walker's cognitive dissonance is nearing its most extreme" (2012, 3): "to kill for yourself is murder, to kill for your government is heroic, to kill for entertainment is harmless" (Yager Development, 2012). Here, Walker turns out to kill for himself: Konrad turns out to be a figment, the orders were long revoked. The playing-subject, however, kills for the government of the game, conducted as a subject to act under the ludic contract. The interpreting player, finally, kills for entertainment.

Interpreting subject	Playing subject	Played subject
"Interpreting subject" (v. Alphen)	"Speaking subject" (v. Alphen)	"Interpreted subject" (v. Alphen)
Deconstructive, ludoliterate	Created in a power structure under a ludic contract	Fictional, represented content of the game
(e.g.) Lars de Wildt	Dual-locus configuration	Cpt. Martin Walker

Figure 2. The Player Subject: interpreting, playing, played

Killing for Entertainment

How harmless is it to kill for entertainment? The subjecthood proposed by *Spec Ops'* stylized simulation demands a playing-subject that kills by demand, while simultaneously criticizing this demand for the interpreting player. In the final section of this paper, I will adopt the function of enstrangement in Bertolt Brecht's major pedagogy to argue that *Spec Ops* destabilization of the unity of players' subjecthood frustrates identification.

I will first introduce Brecht's project as a 'new' type of theatre, focusing specifically on Brecht's *Lehrstücke* – didactical plays that are a type of participatory theatre. Second, I will relate the disruption of actor-audiences' identification with their enacted roles to the critical potential therein. Finally, I will reconnect this spect-actorial enstrangement to digital game-play by the example of *Spec Ops*.

Bertolt Brecht is well-known as an influential proponent of the epic theatre – along with such contemporaries as Max Reinhardt and Erwin Piscator (Gray 1961: 61). Epic theatre can be understood as a type of dialectical theatre in a Marxist sense – i.e. that the interaction or even intermingling between actors and audiences leads to a critical questioning of the material conditions presented in the play. Brecht's friend and accompanying theorist Walter Benjamin identifies "the general educational approach of Marxism [as one] determined by the dialectic at work between the attitude of teaching and that of learning," which in the practice of epic theatre translates to "the constant dialectic between the action which is shown on the stage and the attitude of showing an action on the stage" (1966: 11). Evidently, then, Brecht and

others try to teach the audience something, principally their "capacity for action" (Brecht 1964: 37), specifically on such topics as "oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat market" and so on (71).

Importantly, this dialectical nature of the theatre is made possible by a specific type of engagement with the play: it necessitates a certain critical distance. That is to say, the audience cannot blindly identify or empathize with a protagonist, but must remain critically distant. Instead of "identifying itself with the hero," Benjamin argues, the audience of epic theatre "is called upon to learn to be astonished at the circumstances within which he has his being" (1939: 19). It is this astonishment (*Staunen*) that is the basis for understanding that one can change social conditions, that other worlds are indeed possible. Elsewhere, Benjamin identifies the distance created as not merely "detrimental to illusion" but "meant to make the audience adopt a critical attitude, to make it think" (1938: 38).

This disidentification or erasure of empathy I have above termed 'enstrangement:' in the case of *Spec Ops*, I indicated an enstrangement – a making strange or unfamiliar – from the genre convention of ruthlessly brutal American foreign intervention against a stateless terrorist other. Throughout Brecht's oeuvre, techniques of breaking the fourth wall and a 'radical separation of the elements' (*Trennung der Elemente*) serve to enstrange the audience from the play by stressing the artificiality of it. These techniques are part of Brecht's minor pedagogy: a "means of empowering the [passive] audience in its engagement with conventional bourgeois theatre repertoire" (Calico 2008: 141). Rather than a comparison of Brecht's minor pedagogy to digital games,[13] I am more interested in his major pedagogy as presented through his *Lehrstücke*. As opposed to minor pedagogy's traditionally passive audience, major pedagogy is an "instigation of literal political activism via the theater event" that "transforms the spectator into a spect-actor, a subject with agency that extends well beyond the theater" (ibid.).

I intend to focus on the role of actor-character identification in Brecht's specific genre of major pedagogical theatre: the *Lehrstück*. Constituting a separate genre of Brecht's plays, the *Lehrstücke* are didactic plays intended to learn through acting. I again favour Benjamin's lucid and concise description: whilst the epic theatre is *always* intended "for the actors quite as much as for the spectators," the *Lehrstück* "falls into a category of its own [in that] it facilitates and encourages the interchangeability of actors and audience, audience and actors" (1939: 20). In the case of one play regarding Charles Lindbergh's transatlantic flight, Brecht emphasizes the importance of participation. Whilst "the figure of a public hero in *Der Flug der Lindberghs* might be used to induce the listener at a *concert* to identify himself with the hero," the rewritten version as a *Lehrstück* prevents the listener from "cut[ting] himself off from the masses" (1964: 32, original emphasis). Rather, "the Flier's part must be sung by a *chorus*" in order to "save something of the paedagogical effect," (ibid. original emphasis) which was to criticize the glorification of the event and its hero, instead reflecting on the conditions of the relevant workers (Benjamin 1939: 20).

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[13] A wonderfully educative introductory account of which is presented in Lies van Roessel's MA-Thesis *Restaging the Epic* (2008).

A specific example that sheds light on the role of identification in the *Lehrstücke* is *Die Maßnahme* (Brecht 1930). While it lacks the branching narrative of the dual *Der Jasager/Der Neinsager Lehrstücke* (Brecht 1929; 1930), and has been performed in front of a public, it presents a fundamental enstrangement, not just for the audience but for the actors regarding their roles. As Yasco Horsman notes: "[the] alienation effect is enhanced by the fact that the four comrades take turns playing the young comrade," rotating and re-announcing each role they take up;

> …the roles played on stage are not to be understood as characters with psychological depth; they are merely functions, demonstrations of certain types so that […] the actors do not themselves fall into the trap of identification. (Horsman 2011: 102-03)

Essentially, the actors are made to be continually enstranged, disidentified from the roles they play. Much in the same way that a player might see their avatars taken over by the actor of a cut-scene, losing their presence in third-person configurations. Thus, interpreting-subjects are enstranged when game-play reminds them of the uneasy fit or discrepancy between the playing-subject of the game and the subjective natural presence of ourselves as interpreters outside of the game.

The critical potential of this discrepancy between an interpreting-subject and their playing-subject – the person of the actor and their acted role – is that it may allow an enstrangement from familiar situations through an arousal of "astonishment rather than empathy" (Benjamin 1939: 18). That is to say: by being confronted with familiar things from enstranged perspectives, one's astonishment with them is supposedly renewed. In that way, enstrangement may provoke a critical re-engagement with ideological conventions that are regularly taken for granted as natural.

Concretely, in the case of *Spec Ops*, the thematized reflection enacted by the played character Walker, his team mates and the auctorial narrator of the loading screen enforce a disrupted identification of the interpreting-subject with their in-game performance. The effect, as discussed, has a critical potential: it serves to remind the interpreting-subject of the unabashedly cruel actions taken for granted as enacted by the power structure of the game's affordances and constraints. Retroactively, I argue that it serves as a means to reflect on previous violent deeds performed by convention, hence without hesitation or critical reflection. Keogh reminds his readers of *Gears of War*'s "cover system evoking the intensity and claustrophobia of an utterly futile war" leading the player to act violently "even as the games laughably ask us to weep for a character's dead wife moments after he trash-talked an enemy while stomping on his brains" (Keogh, 2012, 2). Such performances are demanded in these games: stomping on brains is an affordance that the game offers to most efficiently kill a nearby enemy, while its constraints insist on taking this enemy out in the first place in order to progress.

Conclusion: on the Subject of Play

I have schematized the player as indeed, in part, a playing-subject following games' governing structures under a ludic contract or attitude. Simultaneously, players have knowledge and desires outside of this structure, on the basis of which I argued for the recognition of an interpreting-subject in the player. This interpreting-subject, as a ludoliterate interpreter of the game, first of all informs play in that it interprets the presented presented structures according to digital game conventions. On the other hand, the interpreting-subject is important to acknowledge in order not to fall back into an interpellational argument. One can play along with the structure offered by a game, but the player is always more than what he is doing within the game. The 'played' subject, finally, is at once the subject of the game (its presented content, themes and narratives) as well as the controlled character or avatar that is part of that content. While the interpreting-subject may inform and witness the playing-subject, who is present through the played-subject, these are inherently separate. The played-subject Captain Martin Walker has a face, a story, a gender and other properties that the other subjects outside of the possible world need not necessarily have.

With this knowledge, I can further refine my answer to the research question at hand. The type of ideological subject constructed through digital game-play is:

1. a split subject divided across an *interpreting-subject* akin to the deconstructive subjectivity of Raessens or Friedman;

2. who assumes a temporary subjectivity created by the game through a voluntarily assumed *playing-subject* position shaped by the game as a power structure akin to the interpellated subjectivity of Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter;

3. and a represented subject which is a *played-subject* controlled by this playing-subject.

In light of this split subjectivity, I argued that *Spec Ops: the Line* allows the player to enact a double enstrangement between the subjects of play. It does so by creating a ludonarrative dissonance – a difference between what its narrative component relates and what the ludic power structure affords and constrains the player to do. Firstly, it enstranges the playing-subject from the played-subject by demanding certain actions – killing ruthlessly without question, most notably through the use of white phosphorus – while at the same time indicating the inhumanity of this action. The concrete played-subject of Walker, the character controlled by the player, goes insane: what started out as a rescue mission becomes a delusional, selfish and unethical narrative – one driven forward by the playing-subject's progression.

Meanwhile, the played-subject of the game addresses the dangers of unquestioned loyalty by portraying the means by which it is enacted as cruel. After killing hundreds of soldiers, or walking through a battlefield of half-dead soldiers still gasping for breath, the player will often encounter loading screens with written messages – on a level of narration – confronting

the interpreting-subject with their actions as a playing-subject: "How many Americans have you killed today?"

This double enstrangement – of the playing-subject to the played-subject and the interpreting-subject to the playing-subject – works because it depends on a knowledge of conventions. Past repeating the conventions of traditional shooter games, however, *Spec Ops* subverts them. The affordances, constraints and desires offered to the playing-subject are structurally put into question. In the cynical words of the loading screen, the game asks: "Do you feel like a hero yet"?

That these conventions are otherwise habitually left unquestioned – as in many of the generic titles named above – is what grants *Spec Ops'* reflection a critical potential. By comparison to Brecht's major pedagogy, I argued that the enstrangement of a spect-actor – an audience that actively takes part in a didactic play or *Lehrstück* – may lead to a reflection on the world outside of the play. By frustrating the uncritical identification of a spect-actor with their enacted role, spect-actors – and players alike – are able to re-cognize (to learn or know again) the familiar, ideological conventions within and beyond that instance of the (game-)play.

Hence, an uneasy fit between the playing- and played-subject (or ludonarrative dissonance); and an uneasy identification between the interpreting- and playing-subject causes the enstrangement necessary for game-play to challenge ideologies; and for the player to reach renewed insights into the material conditions and social relations of lived society. In that way, material conditions and social injustices that are regularly taken for granted as quasi-natural, ideological conventions can appear once again as they are: unfair, unjust or cruel.

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Biography

Lars de Wildt is an aspiring game scholar and recent graduate from Leiden University's literature and theory department; currently starting a PhD candidacy at KU Leuven's sociology department. Lars has a broad interest in popular culture, ideology criticism and philosophy of culture, specifically concerning the exciting field of game studies. His upcoming research will be conducted at the intersections of play culture, game industry and sociology of religion.