

From Nothingness to Game: Understanding the Emergence of Play through Posthumanism and Nishida Kitaro

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INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces a theoretical framework inspired in equal parts by posthumanism and by the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō for understanding videogames. The article challenges the Cartesian dualism typical in humanist thinking that separates subject and object by referring to Nishida's concepts of "pure experience" (Nishida, [1911]1992), *basho* (place) (Nishida, [1926]2012), and "action-intuition" ([1933]1970), advocating against viewing videogames as isolated, definable objects and highlighting instead an interconnected fabric of existence that integrates human and machine elements. This approach proposes a significant shift from traditional game studies, which often rely on frameworks that emphasize the autonomy and rationality of a human subject distinct from the object of the game, while earnestly heeding the posthumanist call for a deeper engagement with non-Western ontologies and epistemologies (Sundberg, 2014).

Historically, game studies have navigated the realm of humanism, where knowledge is seen as a product of the rational subject observing an object—here, the videogame. However, this separation does not account for the entangled nature of videogame play, where players extend their physical and cognitive boundaries into the digital environment, thus merging with the technological. By integrating posthuman game studies (Bogost, 2012; Cremin, 2016; Fizek, 2022; Janik, 2021; Keever, 2022; Keogh, 2018; Wilde, 2023; Taylor, 2009) approaches with Nishida's non-dualistic philosophy, the paper presents video games not merely as static objects but as dynamic events occurring within a *basho* of videogame. This 'place' dissolves the dualism of player and game, suggesting that identities, roles, and interactions originate as self-contradictions of a single unitary field.

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The *basho*, or place, transcends geographical notions. It is a metaphysical realm where self, entities, and identities appear and gain meaning, emerging from *mu*, or Nothingness. Nishida ([1926]2012), drawing from Zen Buddhism, theorizes Nothingness not as an annihilating void but instead as the ground of all existence. Behind every manifestation of place lies the *zettai mu no basho* (the place of absolute Nothingness), a domain transcending distinctions and dualities, defined by interconnection and relationality where the individual and universal co-become. Within this place of absolute Nothingness, the self undergoes continuous formation and reformation in relation to others, things, and the world, embodying a constant state of becoming. The *basho* of videogame emerges as an event arising from Nothingness, representing a field of interrelations between human and non-human entities, but also thoughts, feelings, and memories, all affecting each other in *intra-action*. By referring to the *basho* we bypass essentialist and formalist theories of videogames assuming a true 'core' of videogames, including those that reframe this core in terms of seemingly non-essential networks, assemblage, or arrangements, recognizing instead that the videogame has no essential quality and is instead an *event* taking place within the self-contradicting flux of consciousness.

This *basho* of videogame unveils the space for *junsui keiken*, or pure experience, to unfold (Nishida, [1911]1992). Nishida's pure experience is a state that is pre-conceptual and pre-individual, non-dualistic, dynamic, and ever-changing. It is relational and contextual, eluding complete capture by language, which would inevitably solidify an inherently fluctuating state. Pure experience has been deployed to understand, for example, phenomena such as playing music or sports, understood as activities that unfold without conscious effort (Feenberg & Arisaka, 1990). Pure experience is then similar in many ways to ideas of 'flow' already popular within gaming discourse (Chen, 2007; Csíkszentmihályi, 2002; Soderman, 2021), where it is sometimes described as 'being in the zone', though differences exist insofar as flow is understood as a subjective state, whereas pure experience precedes subjectivity. Where flow retains a latent Cartesianism, pure experience reframes flow as an *event* where Cartesian subjectivity is, instead, entirely overrun. The posthuman player becomes entangled with the game (and all the assemblage of intra-acting nodes within the *basho* of videogame) in pure experience, understood not as a state belonging to the player but to the game-player-becoming. This concept resonates with Hans-Georg Gadamer's (2004) suggestion that we do not play a game, but rather *we are played*. To illustrate these concepts, the paper employs a concrete analysis of the mobile game *Jetpack Joyride* (Halfbrick Studios, 2011), where gameplay mechanics and player interaction exemplify the emergence of the videogame event from the interplay of various elements before any clear subject-object differentiation. This example highlights how traditional game studies might benefit from a posthuman approach that sees games and gameplay as co-constitutive, rather than as separate entities.

This approach not only challenges the ontological bases of traditional game studies but also provides a framework for understanding the broader implications of technology and identity in contemporary society. By discussing the limitations of humanist and even some posthumanist approaches in capturing the full dynamics of videogames, the paper proposes not only contributes to the theoretical development of game studies within the posthumanist framework but also joins the ranks of other game studies approaches challenging the dominance of Western philosophical paradigms (Mukherjee, 2023; Navarro-Remesal, 2016). It invites scholars and players alike to consider the co-creative relationships between humans and digital technologies as a space where selves merge with the Other, advocating for a deeper understanding and appreciation of the interplay between our technological extensions and our human identities.

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