

Hoarding, Looting, Consuming: Toward an Ecology of Care

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ABSTRACT

In the algorithmically curated landscapes of contemporary video games, players loot, hoard, and consume with a fervour that mirrors and often magnifies the rhythms of late capitalism. From the pixelated mazes of *Pac-Man* to the hyperreal delivery routes of *Death Stranding*, games have evolved into complex systems of accumulation, where virtual objects are not merely tools or rewards but symbols within a mythic economy of desire. In the first part, we discuss how primal survival human instincts are played with to reinforce ideological structures. Shifting player's gaze and desire towards consumption and accumulation. Following this analysis, we offer an ecological alternative model of play and engagement enriched by testimonies from yearlong in game ethnographic study of 20 PUBG mobile players across 5 different player squads and speculation by the authors.

Keywords

Virtual Hoarding, Looting, Consumerism, Ecology, Digital culture, Affect, Digital Ethnography

INTRODUCTION

In video games we can observe that players loot, consume, and hoard in a manner that reflects the lived realities of late capitalism (Bown 2018; Cray 2013). From the pixelated ghosts of *Pac-Man* (Iwatani 1980) to the desolate, hyperreal landscapes of *Death Stranding* (Kojima 2015), video games have become saturated with commodified rituals that simultaneously echo primal survival instincts and the logics of consumerism. In this this essay, we discuss how video games have become overpopulated with virtual objects that are not merely ludic tools or rewards, but which can instead be considered symbols within a mythic system. Building on Roland Barthes' (1972) theory of myth, we argue that games function as myth-making

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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machines, transforming basic human instincts such as collecting (Falkoff 2021) or surviving (Wade 2015) into rituals of consumption (Crary 2013).

This essay develops two critical strands. Firstly, we examine the mythic structures that underpin gaming's commodified landscapes to establish an ontological basis for our inquiry. We consider the lived experience of playing PUBG Mobile over the course of a year within 20 players. Through close observation and sustained engagement with these players, we trace how everyday gaming rituals (completing missions, chasing ranks, navigating seasonal resets) become saturated with representations of progress and consumption. These mechanics, often framed as survival or skill-based challenges, are in fact deeply embedded in a second order of signification: one that reappropriates looting and collecting not only within the game's battlefields but also in its lobbies, menus, and social interfaces. Here, the mythic logic of consumerism is not just played out but lived, negotiated, and occasionally resisted in the micro-choreographies of digital life. This analysis identifies some of the mechanics that nudge and guide players' gaze, movement, and desires across the simulated environment of play. We argue that most video games sustain a sense of play by creating flows of virtual objects and values that draw the player towards collecting and, soon after, towards spending. Players' relationships to their gaming world are facilitated through an avatar that can only perform two gestures: collecting and throwing. What games have become are a series of problems and almost pre-defined solutions (Andreen 2017; Comeau 2025), in which players survive waves of threats in anticipation of cut-scenes, hidden narratives/loots, and other promised virtual items gifted through pseudo-random algorithms.

This realisation can arguably be extended to most games developed to this day where flow and play is maintained in cycles of collecting/throwing, looting/shooting and eventually hoarding/spending. What we trace here is a gradual process of withdrawal in which supposedly different objects pulsate and gravitate the players towards them and more broadly towards consumption cycles. Through missions, players also end up supporting and nudging other players towards shared objects of desire (Ahmed 2010) be it completing missions to collect virtual currency to buy new gear or gather materials to upgrade existing gear or simply rank up. Numerous game objects including virtual currencies, raw materials, discount vouchers, costumes and skins, or gear are in a sense a dance of shapeshifting aesthetics where micro loops of consumption are facilitated through looting, hoarding, and shooting.

Complementing this analysis, we develop a speculative, hopeful phenomenological argument that considers how sustainability might emerge from within gaming cultures. This involves rethinking the network of algorithms, objects, humans, and nonhuman forces that constitute play. In the second half of the essay, we develop a concept of ecology of play and offer a transmedial model of exploration where game design and gameplay might be reoriented to benefit not only players and developers, but also the broader environments - social, affective, and ecological - in which games are embedded.

Drawing on Massumi's (2015) Politics of affect and Bennett's (2010) concept of vibrant matter, we propose a micropolitics and ecology of play. This framework helps us trace how players might begin to sense and collectivise around the materialities of game objects - those that pulse with meaning across different planes of play. We examine

how these vibrant materialities can open new, hopeful pathways beyond the consumerist mythos. In doing so, we argue for a reorientation of play: one that moves from the compulsions of looting toward the possibilities of reflection, relation, and ecological attunement.

FINDING OBJECTS IN AND AROUND PAC-LANDS

Barthes' (1972) theory of myth has its origins in semiotics, which holds that social life is structured by systems of 'codes' (Hawkes and Hawkes 1977). According to Barthes (1972), we interpret and make sense of the world through signs and symbols, effectively encoding our experiences. From this standpoint, he suggests that our perceptions of reality are not direct but constructed; we shape and reframe the world through symbolic systems. He challenges the notion of an unmediated, 'pure', or objectively existing reality, arguing instead that our understanding of the world is always filtered through culturally coded representations. Semiotics, therefore, offers a means of uncovering the layers of meaning embedded in these signs, revealing how they function to produce meaning.

A central concern for Barthes is that the codes we rely on are frequently assumed to be natural or impartial. Yet, semiotic analysis exposes the intricate ways in which language shapes and imposes meaning, influencing how we perceive and construct what we take to be an objective reality 'out there' (Hawkes and Hawkes 1977). In *Mythologies*, Barthes sets out to 'demystify' cultural codes by uncovering how signs are stripped of their original meaning and reloaded with ideological content. In the process of mythmaking, the original sign is not erased, but its meaning is reduced; it is retained only in form, while its depth and specificity are lost. This hollowed-out form is then filled with dominant cultural narratives, which become naturalised through their signification across various media and everyday objects. Barthes attests, "the fundamental character of mythical concept is to be appropriated" (1972, 119). Importantly, he notes that "myth has the task of giving a historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal" (1972, 145). In essence, myth conceals the constructed and contingent nature of ideology by presenting it as natural, timeless, and self-evident.

Importantly, myth does not confine itself to a single signifier, that is, a specific word, image, or symbol used to represent something. Instead, the same mythical concept can appear through many different signifiers across various contexts. "What in the end makes advertisement so superior to criticism is not what the moving red neon sign says, but the fiery pool reflecting in the asphalt" (Benjamin 2021, 476). It is this flexibility that enables ideology to spread widely, embedding itself in different cultural forms, such as advertisements (Arvidsson 2005), film (Wayne 2019), fashion (Entwistle 2000, 2023) or everyday language and communication (Benjamin 2021; C. Fuchs 2020; T. Fuchs 2020) making its messages seem natural and universal.

Within this broader process, video games can be understood as a contemporary site where myth operates as play is commercially restructured and repurposed. What was once a space for spontaneity, creativity, and open-ended interaction (Huizinga 1971) is increasingly shaped by commercial imperatives (Galloway 2006; Dyer-Witthoford and De Peuter 2009). Games are not just entertainment but ideological systems that model and rehearse the logic of contemporary capitalism. Games present themselves as self-contained worlds governed by transparent rules and meritocratic outcomes,

yet these very structures mirror and reinforce neoliberal ideas of competition, productivity, and quantifiable success (Castronova 2006; Bown 2018; Crary 2013).

Play, in this context, has been reconfigured into systems of reward, achievement, and monetisation where “gamified” and “gamblified” mechanisms promote participation whilst directing behaviour towards profitable ends (Brock and Johnson 2022). Rather than offering an escape from everyday structures of control, games often extend them, embedding players in cycles of consumption, repetition, and self-optimisation (Brock and Crawford 2024). In this sense, video games do not merely reflect ideology; they actively participate in its reproduction, transforming the ludic into a regulated site of labour, consumption and control (Woodcock 2019).

Video games, then, simulate and naturalise the structures of capitalist life, packaging abstract economic logics as interactive experiences. A classic example of this is Pac-Man (Iwatani 1980), one of the most successful arcade games of all time. Originally conceived around the concept of “eating” (from the Japanese taberu), Pac-Man inverts the dominant “shoot them all” mechanic of its time into an “eat them all” model. The result is a game structured entirely around consumption: 244 pellets or dots per level, totally 62,000 across the game, plus fruit, ghosts, and so-called “power pills” (Pittman 2015; Wade 2015). Pac-Man, then, is more than a game, it exemplifies perpetual consumption. Its boundless maze, repetitive eating rituals, and escalating difficulty mirror the architecture of contemporary consumer life. Streaming platforms, mobile apps, and online marketplaces operate on similar principles: algorithmic personalisation, frictionless interfaces, and the illusion of autonomy all geared toward sustaining smooth, continuous consumption (Ritzer 2021). In this light, Pac-Man becomes a mythical figure: the ideal neoliberal subject, endlessly devouring, never satiated nor reflective (Crary 2013). He is a “pure consumer” (Poole 2004), whose main purpose is to continue eating. To borrow from Ahmed (2010), to play with Pac-Man is to chase happiness that is always just out of reach. The game dangles the illusion of satisfaction one more pellet, a higher score, a fleeting moment of power but this always slips into the next level or gameplay loop.

What makes Pac-Man so enduring is also what makes it mythic: its rules appear neutral, its goals obvious, and its aesthetics innocent. Yet, as Barthes reminds us, this naturalisation is itself ideological. The act of eating, once spontaneous and essential, is reframed as an efficient, quantified task. Eating power pills can briefly invert power relations, but always within a tightly controlled framework, one where the status quo is never truly challenged. These moments of empowerment are temporary, predictable, and carefully contained, ultimately reinforcing (in Barthes’ terms, a second degree of signification) the very system they appear to disrupt, not unlike other ideological apparatuses (Bown 2018).

A more contemporary articulation of this logic can be found in *Death Stranding* (Kojima 2015), a game that, whilst radically different in form, remains structurally indebted to the same mythic framing of labour and reward. In *Death Stranding*, players take on the role of Sam Porter Bridges, a lone delivery worker tasked with reconnecting a fragmented United States of America by transporting cargo between isolated colonies. Though framed as heroic work, the game’s core loop is deeply repetitive: navigating terrain, optimising routes, and carefully managing inventory across over 600 deliveries. Each task is evaluated by performance metrics such as cargo condition, speed, volume; mirroring the quantified feedback systems familiar from both gamified workplaces and social media (C. Fuchs 2014). Success yields

“likes”, a mechanic that purposively satirises but also perpetuates the logic of social validation through service. What is interesting about *Death Stranding* is that the game’s narrative often acknowledges the absurdity of its mechanics. Sam often breaks the fourth wall, smirking or showing signs of exhaustion, as if aware of the endless grind. This self-awareness, however, does not break the gameplay loop; it transforms the repetitive and laborious structure of the game into something emotionally and visually compelling, masking its underlying capitalist logic through style, narrative, and affect (Bown 2018). Indeed, the player’s effort is folded into a seamless cycle of gamified labour, one which feels meaningful, even noble, precisely because of its immersive setting.

In this sense, *Death Stranding* is a modern reimagining of Pac-Man’s closed loop that is more expansive, more affectively rich, but still driven by endless, task-based consumption. The map replaces the maze; boxes replace pellets; and “likes” substitute for points and finally delivery ranking to high scores. As such, the underlying logic remains familiar: smooth, continuous labour framed as meaningful engagement. Like Barthes’ myth, the rewards always promise satisfaction, yet never quite deliver on this, instead drawing the player ever forward in pursuit of an elusive fulfilment, the experience of which is algorithmically deferred.

So far, we have outlined the conceptual and ontological terrain of this essay, highlighting the underlying mythical structures that shape values and priorities often at the expense of players’ wellbeing, their environments, and their relations with others. Building on this framework, the study turns to an in-depth empirical investigation. We next outline our methodology and introduce the first author’s fieldwork, with the aim of grounding these theoretical insights in lived experience and opening space to reconsider problematic relationships with games, play, and one another, both within and beyond game worlds.

Brief Overview of Empirical Fieldwork and Ethnographic Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, ethnographic approach to examine governance, player subjectification, and algorithmic mediation within contemporary multiplayer gaming environments, focusing on *PlayerUnknown’s Battlegrounds Mobile* (PUBGM) (Krafton 2017). Given the opacity of underlying platform systems and constraints on accessing proprietary infrastructures, the research combines gameplay ethnography with creative practice, cross-platform communication, patent mining and analysis, and expert interviews to develop a multi-layered account of platform governance.

The empirical component is based on a year-long ethnographic engagement conducted by the first author. The core phase involved approximately two hours of daily gameplay over six months, followed by less frequent sessions with both existing and new player groups. Fieldwork took place across matches, lobbies, and progression systems, as well as semi-social environments such as “Cheer Park,” where players interacted between matches. Ethnographic encounters were documented through audio recordings of in-game voice communication, audiovisual capture of gameplay, and reflexive fieldnotes.

Participation was organised through a combination of participant-led and researcher-initiated sessions. Players frequently invited the researcher to join matches and reflect on ongoing issues, while some gameplay sessions were arranged to explore themes such as ranking logics, reward structures, data-driven personalisation, and

behavioural incentives. Recruitment developed organically through in-game interaction and word-of-mouth, leading to expanded engagement with diverse groups, including Afghan, Pakistani, Indian and Iranian players offering an opportunity to engage with middle Asian players using Persian as the language of communication. The breadth of socio-economic background of players included around 10 players with displaced and hard backgrounds playing from refugee camps often seeking a safe place to interact to escape the harsh conditions they experience in their physical lives. These encounters provided insight into how gameplay intersects with experiences of displacement, socio-economic precarity, and transnational connection.

Participants (n=20; 7 female, 13 male) were recruited through opportunistic and snowball sampling across player networks in Iran, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Germany, and the UK. Access was facilitated through the researcher's prior relationship with an initial group of players, who acted as gatekeepers to a broader clan network. This enabled sustained, trust-based participation within embedded social structures.

Ethnographic engagement extended beyond the game through cross-platform communication, including in-game voice and text as well as external applications such as WhatsApp. These channels provided ongoing interaction and revealed how clans and social formations persist beyond gameplay. WhatsApp groups functioned as key sites where strategies, knowledge, and relationships were negotiated, often reflecting tensions between platform logics (competition, monetisation, progression) and players' lived realities.

The research also incorporates practice-based artistic methods. In collaboration with costume designer Katie Powel, the first author developed sculptural works based on three focal participants, exploring relationships between avatars, identity, and social experience. These works were complemented by narrative accounts and function as analytical as well as representational outputs. In addition, collaboration with filmmaker Duncan Nicoll resulted in two video essays, drawing on recorded gameplay and voice interactions to reflect on the affective and relational dimensions of play (Link).

Data sources include ethnographic observations, recorded gameplay and communication, interviews, creative outputs, and documentary materials. Analysis followed an iterative, interpretive approach informed by theories of governmentality and situated knowledge, with attention to systems of ranking, visibility, monetisation, and self-governance.

The research was approved by Abertay University and conducted in accordance with its ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data were anonymised and securely stored using the university's encrypted cloud systems.

PUBGM was selected due to its globally distributed player base, particularly among non-Western and marginalised communities, and its combination of familiar gameplay mechanics with rich social affordances, enabling sustained ethnographic engagement across multiple contexts.

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR NOTICING, EATING AND HOARDING VALUES

This section is based on yearlong ethnographic study of *PUBG Mobile* (Krafton 2017) funded by Royal Society of Edinburgh (2021). Here we explore how digital games function as dense assemblages of affective, economic, and semiotic forces. Through the lens of looting, shrinking zones, seasonal cycles, and digital hoarding, we trace how players are reoriented toward shifting value systems. Algorithmic codes that survive, mutate, and translate across the game's ecosystem. What emerges is a recursive structure of inflation and deflation, where virtual objects shapeshift in meaning and value, caught in cycles of acquisition and discarding that mirror broader capitalist logics (Crary 2013).

PUBG mobile - a free-to-play battle royale game with over 30 million global players - is structured around three primary spaces: the Lobby, Cheer Park, and Game Match. Each Space is separated by loading screens but interconnected through affective, economic, and symbolic flows. The following scene situates this spatial triad in lived practice where Cheer Park becomes a low-pressure theatre for togetherness and rehearsal of accumulation.

Cheer Park at Sunset: A Campfire Reassembled

"We first find each other by voice before we are persons." Shuaib whispers from a refugee camp dorm, five bodies to the room; Ahmed dials in from a Tehran car lot, cleaning cars; I join from elsewhere, a third window into the same square. We idle in the lobby, then drift together into Cheer Park: *PUBG's* open plaza where every mechanic is present but softened, a rehearsal without consequence. We climb into a car and switch to first-person, looking at each other as if the camera were a face. Conversation pools: the chat becomes a small campfire. We walk to the water, swim, surface, and watch the sky perform a sunset that belongs to no one place. Ahmed sings an old Afghan song he remembers from gatherings that are no longer possible. For a few minutes, there is a ceremony of presence: intercontinental, improvised, tender (See short video collage of engagement with players here (Mehrpuoya and Nicoll 2024)).

Cheer Park abstracts acquisition into a spectacle of display without danger. It lowers anxiety: no shrinking zone, no gunfire, abundant cosmetics to try on, and emotes to perform. It also trains desire. Even when nothing is at stake, the plaza tutors' taste, skins, vehicle wraps, weapon finishes, and an inventory of futures that will later be pursued through crates and seasons. The low-pressure rehearsal gently deskills tactical play (hanging out supersedes mastery) while aligning affective needs, companionship, self-organised competition, and recognition with the platform's retention economy. Accumulation is socialised first, monetised later (Geertz 1973).

The Lobby serves as a social and strategic hub, where players form squads, manage tasks, and display rare items. These items - skins, currencies and emotes - are not valuable in themselves but gain meaning through circulation, scarcity, and resonance. A Tesla car skin, for instance, becomes a symbol of prestige not just through utility, but through its rarity and the financial risk required to obtain it via algorithmic gambling systems.

Gameplay is centred around three core mechanics: Land, Loot, and Survive. Looting, both in-match and through monetised systems, becomes a central mechanic of affective capitalism. In matches, looting is a location sensitive, high-stakes, time-sensitive act that bundles the thrill of the unknown gift with the urgency of survival. This dynamic mirrors the structure of arcade games like Pac-Man, where cycles of threat and reward drive movement. In PUBG, players must loot quickly, assess risk, and navigate a shrinking zone that compresses space and intensifies conflict by punishing players who are outside it. This spatial compression is mirrored by a temporal one: the five-week seasonal cycle. At each season's end, players lose rank and access to rare items, forcing them to repeat rituals of acquisition to maintain status where various monetary shortcuts are offered to acquire rare items of desire.

Loot boxes abstract this structure into financial speculation. The absence of a guarantee heightens the anticipation of receiving a promised gift. Players often take significant financial risks to acquire rare items, entangling them in a dual structure of looting, one rooted in tactical survival, the other in economic speculation. The sheer volume and velocity of virtual object production in PUBG Mobile mirrors the dynamics of fast fashion. Just as brands like Shein respond to TikTok trends with near-instantaneous product cycles (Bannigan and Shane 2019; Denton 2023), game developers deploy new skins, emotes, and gear at a breakneck pace. These objects are algorithmically attuned to trends, designed to capture attention, signal status, and drive engagement (Hamari and Keronen 2017). This acceleration is embedded in seasonal architecture, monetisation strategies, and influencer cultures. Players are both acquiring items and participating in a temporal economy of relevance and resonance.

The next scene follows a player whose identity, work, wardrobe, avatar gender, and flag collides with randomised scarcity.

Crates, Debt, and the Wardrobe of Care

Shuaib's evenings run 22:00–03:00. A construction shift becomes unemployment; the lobby becomes a mirror. He changes outfits with care, choosing a female avatar, the Indian flag pinned to his profile to escape Afghan-Iranian racism that trails him into every match. He dances in place while the matchmaking queue spins. Recognition comes in clothes: how they hang, how they shimmer, who notices. The game offers a logic for feeling okay: the right look makes a night survivable. Then the crates become a plan. A season pass here, a discounted bundle there, and suddenly five months' salary borrowed disappears into randomised pulls for rare skins. He opens, and opens, and opens; the inventory grows without yielding the one thing he wants (Weapon: M4 Glacier). The wardrobe blooms, debt blooms, and the gestures of care: flag, avatar, dance are stitched into loss. Twice he deletes and blocks his entire friends list; twice he rebuilds. In the same lobby he is mocked and adored.

Loot crates operationalise asymmetry: identity and belonging are routed through chance-gated items. Cosmetics act as social armour and aspiration, briefly reducing anxiety; yet the randomised pathway elevates pressure to keep up with rotations and limited drops. Over time, value migrates from tactical skill to consumer literacy, knowing seasons, odds, events quietly deskilling play into procurement. This is a perfect commensuration of platform logic of counting conversions and session length with player doing care through clothes. This is a wager that rarely pays out.

Here, Foucault's (2002) concept of governmentality becomes useful. In PUBG Mobile, power is exercised through the modulation of affect, the orchestration of scarcity, and the illusion of choice. Players are governed through play: nudged, incentivised, and reoriented by systems that manage their time, attention, and emotional investment. Seasonal resets, limited-time offers, and cross-platform collaborations are not just marketing strategies; they are technologies of control (Deleuze 2017). Against formal reporting and bans, protection is often improvised; care becomes a tactic players hoard and share.

One Headset, Two Bodies

Matchmaking deals Nadia into our squad: sometimes ruthless, sometimes distracted. She started playing to protect her ten-year-old sister, Mahsa, who had begun to cry quietly after matches. They share a single headset so that Nadia can take the voice channel when it turns ugly. The room becomes a relay: Nadia plays, hands the device to Mahsa; Mahsa plays, hands it back to Nadia. Between firefights she makes lists who to mute, who to block, which hours are safer. She wants friends, not romance. But one friendship curdles into coercion: a male player sends images of self-harm, pressuring Nadia toward intimacy. The threats stretch over six months, across matches and DMs, until she breaks down mid game and tells another squadmate. He helps her leave; later he proposes. Nadia deletes her account, disappears, and returns under a new name to rebuild a circle that will not hurt her sister.

What Nadia hoards are protective practices: mute lists, block habits, time-of-day heuristics, and account resets. These reduce anxiety in the short-term but individualise the labour of safety. Cosmetics and rank do little against voice-based harm. Platform level reporting and longstanding bans exist, but relational repair is scarce; cooperation and empathy are weakly incentivised compared to engagement. The skills that rise are moderation literacy and avoidance choreography, not tactical mastery another deskilling that maps community care onto private micro actions.

Birthday Queue, Accent Drift

Nadia's life orbits the nightly slot: 09:00 pm to 03:00 am. Her mother notices "that game" in her speech, the accent tilting, vocabulary borrowed from the lobby. On her 20th birthday, the people who remembers it are in game friends; the lobby fills with emotes and jokes, the closest thing to a party she wants. She dresses her avatar carefully; in styles she cannot safely wear outside. During the day she lets Mahsa grind on her account to lift rank, a shared labour that nudges their squad into stronger lobbies. After she escapes the abusive DM siege, she wipes her presence and starts again. Unemployed, upper middle class, future unspecified: what feels stable is PUBG's calendar, events, resets, rotations. Wardrobe, rank, and recognition smooth the day, even as they tighten the loop.

Cosmetics work as everyday affect regulation a feeling of rightness in one's skin while the seasonal reset recycles urgency. Account sharing to raise rank and the micro-optimisations that follow (quest timing, loadout planning) shift value from mechanical skill to procedural knowhow and schedule management. Anxiety dips; pressure rises. Platforms treat these behaviours as healthy engagement; players experience them as additive maintenance. A wellbeing centric commensuration would favour deterministic identity pathways (no randomness for cosmetics), tunable matchmaking

(cooperation > K/D), and DM safeguards, so that recognition can persist without monetised scarcity.

Looting also reconfigures the player's gaze psychologically, physiologically, and socially. Players scan for lootable objects: crates, airdrops, and enemy corpses. Airdrops compel players to look skyward, track trajectories, and calculate risk versus reward. This gaze is tactical, affective, and embodied. Drawing on Foucault's clinical gaze (Foucault 2002; Ristić et al. 2021) and Urry's tourist gaze (Urry 1992), we can understand this looting gaze as socially and technologically patterned a way of seeing shaped by systems of value, scarcity, and spectacle.

This gaze extends beyond the match. Monetisation models blur the line between player and producer, turning gamers into what Fourcade and Klutzz (2020) call hybrid consumer-producers. Through livestreams, YouTube videos, and eSports, players like Panda: a PUBG Mobile YouTuber with over 12 million followers transform looting into spectacle. In one stream, Panda spends nearly £4,000 on loot crates, not to acquire specific items, but to perform the act of opening them. This is gamblified consumption as content, where the thrill of acquisition is aestheticised, monetised, and algorithmically amplified. Beyond individuals, inventories scale into clan infrastructure and social currency.

NightShift Clan: Inventory as Constitution

Kabul nights: Javid used to be a fashion model before the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan (Graham-Harrison and Harding 2021); now he guards a hospital with a Kalashnikov on his lap and a phone in his hand. A pharmacist taught him PUBG Mobile to keep awake; now he plays 6–8 hours a day, often through the shift, and sometimes scolded by nurses for laughing too loudly. His network spans labour geographies: Bahman on a factory line in Iran; John at an Amazon warehouse in Oklahoma, sneaking rounds between pallets; Hamed watching over a coal operation and crypto rigs. With Abdullah in Sweden, he founded a clan, "Everyone welcome from any race or ethnicity." On WhatsApp they circulate memes, adult clips, match times. In game they compete, gamble, buy and sell accounts, trade cheats from grey markets. Javid is tactically sharp but uninterested in "getting better"; what matters is hanging out and ranking. The motto drifts: inclusive → Muslim centered → neutral PUBG alliance. After a back injury, Javid moves into a household of 17 family members and keeps playing nightly. He has never met any of the other players, but the clan is his most regular room.

For the clan, hoarding is infrastructure. Rare skins, sale accounts, and even cheats are forms of social capital that cement loyalty and status. Coordinated help to finish missions or secure a drop both reduces anxiety (the group can fix a bad season) and intensifies pressure to keep up with rotations and spend. What counts as skill shifts again: less map sense, more market sense, schedule alignment, and exploit literacy. A different commensuration would let matchmaking centre rhythms of life (shift work, language, care roles) and reward cooperation as a first-order metric moving value from platform-driven scarcity to player-driven solidarity.

If digital hoarding reveals the accumulation of objects as a systemic condition of gameplay, it also raises a deeper question: what kind of objects are being accumulated, and how do they orient players' desires and behaviours? The cluttered

inventories and affective attachments described above are not neutral by-products of play, but symptoms of a more fundamental ecology in which objects actively shape perception, value, and action. To move beyond the pathology of accumulation, the following section shifts focus from quantity to ontology, examining how different types of objects: part-objects and macro-objects operate as forces that direct, diffuse, and sustain desire within and beyond game worlds.

Digital Hoarding and the Pathologies of Accumulation

What video games share with digital fashion, esports, and capitalist systems is the fabrication of pseudo-necessities, what Crary (2013) calls the creation of deficiencies for which new commodities are essential solutions. In PUBG Mobile, players are provided with newer, shinier, and more complex virtual goods as they progress through each seasonal cycle. One player's inventory over four years included over 223 outfits, 233 headwear items, 25 pairs of footwear, and hundreds of crafting materials, discount vouchers, and decorative objects. This accumulation is often unintentional and automated, facilitated by pseudo-random rewards, looting mechanics and pseudo-crafting interfaces.

This phenomenon is not limited to free-to-play games. Even subscription-based or premium titles now include monetised content that encourages compulsive acquisition. The game itself becomes a hoard, a site of data clutter, reflecting broader trends in digital storage and surveillance. Games are now intense sites of monetisation and behavioural analytics. Major game companies invest heavily in surveillance technologies to monitor, nudge, and commercialise player behaviour (Bucher 2018; Zuboff 2023).

This surveillance is not only external but also internalised. Players monitor themselves and each other through infographics, achievements, and performance metrics, reinforcing a culture of self-surveillance. As Švelch (2024) argues, gameplay data becomes a tool of behavioural governance, shaping how players engage with the game and with each other.

The compulsive acquisition of digital goods parallels clinical definitions of hoarding disorder. The accumulation of objects combined with difficulty discarding them results in clutter and distress (Grisham and Barlow 2005; Steketee et al. 2000). Players often form emotional attachments to virtual items, which represent identity, control, and value (Cushing 2013). As Hampton (2008) shows in *POSSESSED*, hoarding unfolds in three stages: control, possession, and submission. In games, players move from curating their inventories to being overwhelmed by them, as digital objects gain autonomy over their play experience and the value they hold, and labour players are required to provide to maintain the value of their hoards.

The challenge in conceptualising digital hoarding lies in its immateriality. Unlike physical clutter, digital accumulation is invisible, yet its psychological and behavioural impacts are profound. Van Bennekom et al. (2015) define digital hoarding as the accumulation of files to the point of disorganisation and stress. In gaming, this manifests through overloaded inventories, redundant items, and the constant pressure to manage, upgrade, and display possessions.

Ultimately, digital hoarding in games is not a fringe behaviour; it is a systemic outcome of design. All players are potential hoarders, shaped by looting mechanics, seasonal

cycles, and surveillance infrastructures. As such, digital hoarding should be studied alongside other gaming disorders, including addiction and gambling, to understand how affect, data, and capital converge in the architecture of play.

PART-OBJECTS, MACRO-OBJECTS, AND THE ECOLOGY OF DESIRE: DRILL BABY DRILL

Reflecting on our analysis of gazing and looting in PUBG mobile, here we develop a phenomenological lens around virtual objects and their relation to current concerns around video games, particularly two interlinked concepts: sustainability (as it is currently being conceptualised and practised in different games) and ecology (as a process and practice of noticing and internalising sustainability). Our aim is to offer a way out of the current domain of ecocriticism and preaching towards queer unknowing and sometimes unsettling worldviews in relation to gaming environments and beyond.

This section begins by identifying two refraining forces that shape digitally simulated environments: part-objects and macro-objects. These forces are not merely structural; they are affective, ideological, and operational, guiding the formation of meaning, behaviour, and assemblages within game worlds.

Part-objects are micro-orientations; seeds of intentionality (Massumi 2015) that direct players and systems toward the survival of specific values. These objects do not exist in isolation. They form alliances with other entities, creating short-lived assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari 1981) that bend meaning in subtle ways. Barthes' concept of inflexion captures this distortion: a slight twist in the trajectory of meaning that reorients desire. Ahmed (2010) conceptualises this as happy objects that deepen this affective logic: objects culturally coded to promise happiness (wedding rings, flags, digital skins) are kept close, always visible, always desirable, yet never fully attainable. They circulate the promise of happiness, reinforcing orientations rather than delivering outcomes. Like Barthes' myth, they operate not through truth but through directionality.

In contrast, macro-objects encapsulate a range of orientations and frequencies into a singular, prioritised outcome. Morton's (2013a) hyperobjects exemplify this: entities so vast and distributed (climate change, capitalism, COVID-19) that they exceed human perception. These objects are sticky, they linger in consciousness, and viscous, as they resist being ignored. They are interobjective, persisting to other objects and systems, and they transcend spatial and temporal boundaries. For McLuhan (1994) and Guattari (2005), mass media play this role; for Abraham (2022), it is the game industry itself an entity whose environmental impact rivals that of entire nations, driven by rare mineral extraction and global logistics.

These macro-objects are not just large, they are inflations of perception, made possible by the techniques of consumer capitalism. The global infrastructure of production and consumption sustains a mythic structure, populated by simulacra (Baudrillard 1994) objects that no longer refer to reality but to other signs. This creates a hyperreality where oppositional forces (guilt/redemption, acquisition/discarding) are folded into one another, disorienting users, avatars, and systems toward a singular aim: consumption. McLuhan (1967) attests that when information speed is increased it has the power to render our collective unconscious outside us as the environment. In the unconscious world, everything happens all together, and at once and therefore

as McLuhan suggests, it is a crazy world. It is not far-fetched to suggest that such fragmented desired amplified in the body of game objects across gaming platforms is the same logic and mechanics of how pornography is constructed and enacted, a fragmented yet fetishised system of values (Perniola 2022).

Over the past three decades, environmental discourse has increasingly emphasised the degradation of nature due to human activity, often framed through moral and existential panics. These narratives are frequently accompanied by promises of sustainability, balanced growth, and ecological responsibility. Drawing on Foucault's notion of power/knowledge, Timothy Luke (1995) offers a critical lens through which to understand these developments. In his analysis, the "discourse of environmentality" emerges as a disciplinary formation one that refashions natural environments into sites where power and knowledge converge as ensembles of geopower and ecoknowledge. This framing does not merely describe ecological crises; it actively produces them as objects of governance, embedding environmental concerns within broader regimes of control and intervention (Morton 2009), leading to what Falkoff (2021) calls environmental hoarding, where humans tirelessly attempt to collect and hoard diminished and extinguished life, be it frozen, or kept inside laboratories, buried underground, to survive all sorts of disasters and environmental threats.

Luke's (1995) Foucauldian readings of environmentality trace a triangular process of governance in which power/knowledge enables the construction of a technosphere; a domain where humans are equipped with the tools and authority to manipulate the environment (Deleuze and Guattari (1981, ch. 10), presented this with great humour in revisiting of Canon Doyle's professor Challenger). Simultaneously, through moralising regimes like sustainability, the very same apparatus grants humans the right to "save" the ecosphere, reinforcing a cycle of intervention. In this process, terms like environment, nature, and ecology become interchangeable and inflated, their meanings shifting according to the prevailing mode of capitalist engagement. Thus, environmentalism becomes not only a site of resistance but also a mechanism of control where ecological concern is folded into the logic of neoliberal governance and market rationality (Morton 2009).

Video games are no exception, both as an industry with its big manufacturers promising to reduce their carbon footprint, and efforts by mainstream game engines such as Unity to make games consumption and production pipeline more efficient, reduce global air travel are similar processes taken by other neighbouring industries such as Fashion. This is precisely the process of environmentalism that Luke sees as the art of governing consumers through emerging green markets. At the same time the rhythms of consumerism and flow of values through virtual and physical remain business as usual.

Games do not merely reflect this network; they simulate and reproduce it. As Castronova (2006) argues in *Synthetic Worlds*, games mirror the political and economic logics of capitalism, expanding them across digital terrains. Within this context, a new kind of part-object has emerged: the sustainability object. This object is not just aesthetic or functional it is ideological, designed to promote what Luke (2009) calls green consumerism: the embedding of ecological concern into products to make consumption appear less harmful. Rather than challenging the logic of consumption, the sustainability object offers a moral alibi for continued participation in consumer capitalism. This aligns with Guattari's (2005) critique where he insists that

ecological transformation must occur across environmental, social, and mental registers. When sustainability is reduced to branding or gamified mechanics, it becomes a technocratic solution that bypasses deeper transformations in subjectivity and social relations. It becomes a function of Integrated World Capitalism, which absorbs and neutralises dissent by commodifying even its critiques (Bown 2018). These objects: part, macro, and sustainability operate within a broader ecology of things, where objects are not passive tools but active participants in shaping behaviour, perception, and affect (Latour 2004). They form swarms of intensity, publics of orientation, and assemblages of desire. In this ecology, video games become laboratories for understanding how objects relate, influence, and transform, how they refract the world and reassemble it in playable, consumable, and often contradictory forms.

Before the fear of experiencing life without “nature” or “environment” a fear that Morton (2009) confronts head-on in *Ecology Without Nature*, there has long been a tradition of thinking that resists the very categories we now mourn. Taoist philosophy (Watts 2012), speculative realism (Morton 2013b), new materialism (as articulated by Bennett (2010)), hydrofeminism (Neimanis 2017), and the metaphysical object-oriented thinking of Morton all gesture toward a world without stable externalities, where agency is distributed, withdrawn, and strange. These traditions do not lament the loss of nature; but they go further and reconfigure the very terms through which we relate to the world.

In this reconfiguration, affective intensities - especially negative ones, as Massumi (2015) explores - become crucial. They are not merely emotional states but ontological forces, shaping how bodies and objects relate, withdraw, and resonate. These intensities are not obstacles to knowledge but gateways to other modes of being. The emergent relationality and objectivity that forms through Bennett’s vibrant materialism and politicised through Massumi’s affective realisations and Morton’s objects that he senses in the dark and deep dungeons of nihilism are all orientations towards individual playful resistance. The hope is to generate a distributed swarm of resistance formulations around Debord’s (2024) spectacle that not only operates within economic domains but the entire society. Guattari (2005) goes further and argues that the spectacle is also oscillating and bloating the environment, nature and ecology with different meanings harmonising with the mental, social, and environmental domains which he calls Integrated World Capitalism.

Walter Benjamin, in this context, becomes a vital interlocutor. He reminds us that the problem and the magic lie in language itself. In *One-Way Street*, Benjamin (2021) explores how meaning emerges not through linear clarity but through a multiplexed narrative a constellation of signs, flags, and objects that speak in fragments. Language, for Benjamin, is not a transparent medium but a revelatory process. Benjamin proposes that every object has its own language, and that naming is not an act of domination but of revelation, a way in which things disclose themselves to us. This resonates deeply with Morton’s metaphysics: objects are not mute or inert; they speak, but not in human tongues. They withdraw, they shimmer, they affect. To engage with them is to engage with a kind of magic language a language that is not about control or clarity, but about attunement, iteration, and play.

In this light, video games - especially those like *Inside* (Playdead, 2016) become ritual spaces where this magic language is enacted. They are not just games but ontological laboratories, where players can experiment with presence, absence, agency, and

affect. The final monstrous body in *Inside* is not a failure of subjectivity but its metamorphosis, a becoming-object, a becoming-multiple, a becoming-strange.

Thus, experimental play is not a luxury but a philosophical practice and is much needed and core to the idea of play. It should be cultivated in both secret and public, to protect the fragile emergence of new modes of being; public, to share, resonate, and transform. As Morton might say: sometimes play trickfully, sometimes in resonance, and sometimes just stay and stare idly at the screen.

TOWARDS THE ART OF NOTICING

Morton, in *Realist Magic*, proposes that objects are “bigger on the inside than they are on the outside” (2013b, 50) a metaphysical claim that challenges the spatial and temporal assumptions of classical ontology. Objects, in Morton’s view, are not passive or inert; they generate time and space, and they do so in ways that are withdrawn, non-totalisable, and irreducible. This is not a warm metaphysics; it is cold, strange, and often bleak. The world Morton describes is not one of harmony or balance, but of asymmetry, opacity, and uncanny intimacy.

This bleakness finds a haunting analogue in the world of *Inside* (Playdead, 2016), where the player inhabits a fragile, defenceless child navigating a hostile, mechanised world. Agency is compressed, not expansive; the player is not a hero but a fugitive. Time is suspended in anxiety, and space is organised through threat and retreat. The puzzles deepen not only the game’s mechanics but its existential weight; each solution leads to further entanglement, culminating in the formation of a monstrous, collective cyborg body. This final form, grotesque and liberated, no longer fears threats. It embodies the nihilistic metaphysics of Morton’s objects: unsettled, withdrawn, and existing in a state of alternative presence.

Morton’s engagement with nothingness and nihilism is not a descent into despair but a defensive convolution a way to protect thought from the false comforts of anthropocentrism and metaphysical closure. His *ecology without nature* (Morton 2009) is an invitation to explore the world not as a coherent whole but as a mesh of strange strangers, where meaning is partial, relational, and always in flux.

Concluding Synthesis: From PUBG Mobile to a Care-Centred Ecology of Play

This essay has explored how looting and hoarding in video games are not merely gameplay mechanics but ideological structures that reflect and reproduce broader consumerist logics. Through the lens of games like *PUBG Mobile*, we have shown how pseudo-gifts (Fourcade and Kluttz 2020), seasonal cycles, and algorithmic scarcity cultivate compulsive accumulation, mirroring the rhythms of late capitalism.

Across this essay, *PUBG Mobile* and *Inside* work as complementary lenses on contemporary play. *PUBG Mobile* demonstrates how looting, hoarding, and seasonal compression orchestrate affect and attention: randomised scarcity and reset cycles reduce anxiety in the moment while rerouting pressure into acquisition and optimisation. Ethnographic scenes showed how care is privatised into player micro labours (mutes, blocks, gifting within squads) even as the platform scales revenue through cosmetic churn and crate economies. What we’ve traced is how scarcity engines modulate play; mastery is quietly deskilled into consumer literacy and

schedule management, and social worlds are sustained by inventories of acquisition and achievements.

Inside, by contrast, reframes play as an ontological experiment rather than an acquisitive loop. Its slow, anxious choreography and final becoming object make a different claim on agency: meaning accrues through presence, relation, and withdrawal rather than through possession. In this register, “collection” is ephemeral and narrative (moments, atmospheres, uncanny encounters) instead of material; players are invited to attune to objects’ strange languages rather than to accumulate them. Where PUBG Mobile maps the contemporary logics of platform capitalism, Inside furnishes a counter imaginary of play slower, reflective, and relational that resists the myth of progress through inventory.

Taken together, these two trajectories open a practical horizon: design that re-commensurates value away from acquisition and toward relation, generosity, cooperation, and ecological sensitivity. The ethnography clarifies what players already do to care for one another: sharing accounts, coordinating clan resources, buffering voice harm, while the phenomenology of Inside clarifies what games can stage without material accumulation: memory, story, mood, and encounter. The path forward is not anti-loot so much as post-loot: build systems where identity and recognition are deterministic and shareable, where calendars carry social meaning, where feedback surfaces emotional, social, and ecological consequences, and where mechanical diversity sustains competitive, cooperative, contemplative, and creative play styles.

Rather than reinforcing scarcity driven accumulation, the design horizon shifts from looting to gifting: as one player suggested: “let players redistribute value at the point of acquisition and build bonds through daily rituals of giving that reward sharing, support, and cooperation over self optimization”. Seasonal events can be reoriented toward real-world causes, charitable drives, environmental awareness, and community storytelling, so the game’s calendar carries social meaning, not just content drops. Diversity must extend beyond cosmetic representation to mechanical diversity, enabling competitive, cooperative, contemplative, and creative play styles that reflect players’ values. As speculated by one of our participants Shuaib: “Designers can explore looting without consumption, where what is collected are memories, stories, and ephemeral experiences rather than material goods, opening space for meaning-making without hoarding pressure”. This sits alongside ecological sensitivity, acknowledging the material costs of production and fostering slower, more intentional modes of play. Finally, organic feedback and reflective systems should surface the emotional, social, and ecological consequences of choices, gently nudging players toward care-centric engagement and re-commensurating value away from acquisition and toward relation.

Acknowledgements:

This research was supported by a year-long full-time fellowship funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE Research Fellowship, 2021–2022). We would like to thank Tom Brock for his early contributions and insightful discussions, which were integral to the development of this work. We are also grateful to Professor Ruth Falconer and Dr. Dayna Galloway, heads of our departments, for their continued support and trust. Finally, we thank Professor Jim Bown, Head of School, and Abertay University for providing a supportive research environment.

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