



Video Games as Self-Cultivation

An Empty Approach to Gaming

Video games are often viewed as a mere form of entertainment that can have a negative impact on the gamer, such as increased aggression or anti-social tendencies. However, if video games can indeed have adverse effects, then the opposite must also be logically plausible; that is, video games can have a positive effect on the gamer. The paper argues for this latter possibility by formulating the concept of “self-cultivational gaming,” an approach to gaming that could lead to positive outcomes. The concept draws on Buddhist-influenced theories of self-cultivation in Japanese arts, interpreted through the philosophies of Nishitani Keiji and Hisamatsu Shin’ichi, which contain a self-cultivational element. The paper also explores the practical side of self-cultivational gaming through an auto-ethnographical analysis of the writer’s experiences.

KEYWORDS: Self-cultivation—Japanese arts—Japanese Buddhism—philosophy of video games—self-cultivational gaming—Nishitani Keiji—Hisamatsu Shin’ichi—emptiness—Formless Self—realization—autoethnography

For many, video games might initially spark associations with negative phenomena related to gaming—to, for example, increased aggression or anti-social behavior. In contrast, video games have always been seen as something positive too. The present paper focuses on the latter aspect, especially on what will be called “self-cultivational gaming,” i.e., gaming that can transform the player and have ethical implications outside of gaming in the everyday life of the player. Explorations of the possibility of self-cultivational gaming is a new approach within the wider spectrum of philosophical considerations of video games. A notable example of this approach is Christopher Goto-Jones’s *Virtual Ninja Manifesto*, which explores the possibility of so-called “Martial Arts Video games” (hereafter MAVs), like *Tekken*, *Street Fighter*, or *Mortal Combat*, serving as a medium for self-cultivation.

The aim of the present paper is to broaden the scope of self-cultivational gaming, first broached by Goto-Jones, from being limited only to MAVs to also include the genre of so-called “Soulslike games.” To this end, the present paper will examine theories of self-cultivation on the one hand and philosophies of Nishitani Keiji and Hisamatsu Shin’ichi, as applied into the context of self-cultivation, on the other. The application of Nishitani’s and Hisamatsu’s philosophies into the context of self-cultivation serves a dual purpose: firstly, it grounds the practical side of self-cultivation presented here while, secondly, demonstrating that it is possible to approach Nishitani’s and Hisamatsu’s philosophies from the viewpoint of self-cultivation and that this approach in fact is an illuminating approach to their philosophies in general.¹ For such an approach can enhance our understanding of

1. To be sure, this second aim has already been discussed in some length by Bret W. Davis. However, in his essay Davis treats the Zen Buddhist practice of Nishitani as separate from his philosophizing, while stating that Nishitani’s practice did inform his philosophizing (see

the process of realizing, in Nishitani's twofold sense of both "making manifest" and "understanding," the "subject on the field of emptiness," or what Hisamatsu calls the "Formless Self."

In addition to the theoretical inquiry into the possibility of self-cultivational gaming in the context of Soulslike games, the present paper also considers its practical side. It will be argued that self-cultivational gaming is not a passive activity but essentially one informed by a certain intention and theory behind that intention. In other words, self-cultivational gaming is possible only as a unity of theory and practice. The theoretical side will, therefore, be augmented by autoethnographical² reflections based on my own experiences of playing Soulslike games.

PROLOGUE: SETTING THE STAGE

Before engaging the topic of this paper, the possibility of self-cultivational gaming, we must set its stage by addressing some possible doubts and pitfalls. Admittedly, the idea of "self-cultivational gaming" does seem rather imaginative and frivolous. However, it builds on the same assumption shared by many who disparage video games, namely, that video games can affect the player. For those disparaging video games, that effect is, evidently, a negative one. However, if games can have a negative effect on the player, then it must be at least a possibility that the converse is also true, that gaming can have beneficial effects too.³ While the focus here will be on the latter, the present paper does acknowledge that gaming can result, for example, in addiction, which certainly is an issue that needs to be taken seriously. Arguably, self-cultivational gaming in itself might guard the player against gaming mechanics that emphasize quick gratification and which can be addictive, since self-cultivational gaming must be firmly grounded in a long-term intention of cultivating oneself. Still, an in-depth exploration of

DAVIS 2021). In a sense, while not a refutation of Davis's arguments, my aim is to illustrate the possibility of understanding certain elements of Nishitani's – and Hisamatsu's – philosophy as self-cultivational. That is, to further explore how their philosophies have been informed by self-cultivational practice.

2. On the method of autoethnography, see DENZIN 2018.

3. GOTO-JONES 2016, 15.

the complex phenomenon of gaming-related addiction is beyond the scope of this paper.

Another perspective on which self-cultivational gaming might not appear as frivolous is based on a consideration of various schools of Buddhism in China and Japan. As Nishitani points out, when looking at their myriad forms of practice (行), we can see that these forms are innumerable. At the same time, these practices share the view that they are ways (道) for the sake of attaining the law or dharma (法) as the essential self-awareness of the self.⁴ Self-cultivational gaming based on Buddhist ideas of practice and cultivation might, then, be seen as one self-cultivational practice among many.

Further, in our contemporary cultural situation, as Nishitani underlines, Zen is not confined to its traditional geographical and cultural locations but has spread to new places with widely different cultural, intellectual, and historical backgrounds—namely, to the Americas and various countries of Europe—and thus needs to find new expedient means to transmit the dharma in the present age.⁵ I believe it is possible to view the approach of the present paper to gaming as just such a new expedient means, as a novel practice based on traditional ideas for the sake of attaining the fundamental truth.

Such a claim does, however, raise the question whether the present exploration of self-cultivational gaming is not merely a “re-discovery of the ‘Zen and the art of X’ fashion.”⁶ I will treat this question in further detail in the concluding section. Suffice it to state here that the present inquiry is set apart from the Zen and the Art of X fashion not only through its being strongly theoretically grounded, but also by the fact that Zen and the art of X books usually emphasize repetition and discipline while, at the same time, forgoing the aspect of ethical transformation. As will be seen, for an activity to count as self-cultivational, discipline and repetition are not enough. Any given self-cultivational activity must also contain an ethical intention aimed towards a holistic transformation of the practitioner.

Since the present paper builds its arguments in part on the similarities between certain aspects of martial arts and Soulslike games, and because

4. NKC 20: 58

5. The collected works of Nishitani Keiji, vol. 11, 295–296, hereafter NKC.

6. GOTO-JONES 2016, 9

the arguments of the present paper are greatly influenced by ideas related to Zen Buddhism, one particularly important topic to address is the supposed strong connection between Zen and martial arts. Even so, much like the problem of gaming-generated addiction, this topic is a thorny issue which cannot be treated in much detail here and short statement must suffice.

In contemporary imagination, the firmly held belief that Zen and martial arts are intrinsically linked is in large part due to the popularity of Eugen Herrigel's book *Zen in the Art of Archery* and an uncritical reproduction of a romantic bushidō discourse.⁷ However, contemporary research has shown that Herrigel's book is full of half-truths, misunderstandings, and mystification of all things Japanese—things which can arguably also be said of the bushidō discourse.⁸ Further, contemporary research suggests that the connection between martial arts and Zen itself is dubious at best and completely invented at worst.⁹

While these findings of contemporary research could be seen to jeopardize the project of the present paper, it is not necessarily so. For even if a tradition is an invented one, it does not make it any less real,¹⁰ which is certainly true with martial art practitioners, of whom many do in fact practice with a self-cultivational intention. Therefore, while the connection between Zen and martial arts might be an invented one, this fact does not erase the fact martial arts are and can be approached as self-cultivational practices. In addition, various other Japanese arts, like *chadō* and calligraphy, are still considered both self-cultivational and to be informed by the influence of Zen. As such, self-cultivational gaming which is inspired not only by martial arts but by self-cultivational arts in general remains a real possibility. Furthermore, it is precisely this *possibility* that the present paper focuses on: On what grounds and in what way can self-cultivational gaming be possible?

Naturally, Buddhism is not the sole intellectual tradition that has had greatly influenced Japanese self-cultivational arts; Confucianism too has had a major influence on the ethics behind self-cultivational arts.¹¹ In this

7. HERRIGEL 1953; GOTO-JONES 2020.

8. See YAMADA 2011.

9. YAMADA 2011; GOTO-JONES 2020.

10. GOTO-JONES 2016, 21.

11. CARTER 2001; CARTER 2008; GOTO-JONES 2016; CARTER 2020.

paper I will, however, focus only on Buddhist approaches to both ethics and self-cultivation for two reasons. Firstly, since the focus of this paper, namely, self-cultivational gaming, is still quite novel, considerable length must be devoted to examining its possibility in general, effectively taking space from a comprehensive analysis of Japanese ethical thought in the context of self-cultivational practices. This, in other words, leaves Confucianism out of the scope of the present paper. Secondly, the philosophical framework of the present article is based not only Buddhism, but on the Buddhist-influenced philosophies of Nishitani and Hisamatsu which are not, at least expressly, Confucian. These two points do, I believe, justify setting aside the treatment of Confucianism from this paper, reserving it for future explorations of the idea of self-cultivational gaming.

To conclude this section, it must be noted that the claims presented here regarding self-cultivational gaming must not be read as refutations of traditional self-cultivational arts. The exploration of self-cultivational gaming carried out here does not imply that traditional self-cultivational arts cannot still serve as mediums for self-cultivation, nor that self-cultivational gaming is the only or the best “new self-cultivational art.” Rather, the arguments of the present paper are in part elucidations of the basis on which *all* self-cultivational arts, be they old or new, can be self-cultivational. Therefore, the present paper can also be seen as an attempt to enhance our understanding of self-cultivational arts in general.

TUTORIAL: PHILOSOPHIES OF SELF-CULTIVATION

As stated, the theoretical side of self-cultivational gaming will be built on the examination of the approaches to and aims of self-cultivational practice found in Japanese self-cultivational arts, like the way of tea and calligraphy. I will not, however, cite specific practices in these arts, but the principles behind them. These principles will, then, be examined in the light of the philosophies of Nishitani and Hisamatsu—an examination which will, reciprocally, shed light on the self-cultivational elements present in their philosophies.

A fundamental aspect of self-cultivational arts is the fact that the “insights and personal development” achieved through them “are not meant to apply exclusively to the particular art” in which these insights and per-

sonal development were gained.¹² Rather, these insights and personal developments are thought to extend to the totality of one's life. Self-cultivation does not, then, mean mere development of certain skills, but a "development of personality," from which "the strongest ethical insights arise."¹³

A second important aspect of self-cultivational practices is their connection to meditation—one might call them "meditative practices" in a broad sense. Strictly speaking they are "meditation in movement," i.e., forms of meditation not restricted to the meditation cushion but extended beyond it to, for example, walking.¹⁴ On this basis, "the many activities and skills of the various arts in Japan are themselves forms of meditation," manifesting as, for example, the "repetitive practice in the martial arts, or intense focus on precise movement in making tea, arranging flowers, or making pottery."¹⁵ Indeed, meditative practices can and have been adopted to various artistic practices outside of Buddhism from which they partly derive from, making them, at least to an extent, "methodologies of cultivation."¹⁶ As a result, "it would seem that any artistic practice taken in the broad sense can be viewed as a self-cultivational practice leading to enlightenment" when accompanied by a suitable "diligence and seriousness of purpose."¹⁷

While it might be possible to approach any artistic practice diligently and seriously, self-cultivational practice is not merely diligent and serious. In addition to diligently practicing one's art, the practitioner must enter correct relations with things through understanding attained bodily and by "cultivating virtue" within human relations.¹⁸ In other words, self-cultivational practice must contain an *ethically informed intention*. This intention must be kept at the forefront of practice in the sense that it must not recede into being a mere implicit background sporadically alluded to. Conversely, an ethical ideal alone is not sufficient but needs diligent practice to realize that ethical ideal.

In short, a self-cultivational practice, be that practice, for example, self-

12. CARTER 2008, 14–15.

13. CARTER 2008, 14.

14. CARTER 2008, 15–16.

15. Ibid.

16. CARTER 2008, 14.

17. Ibid.

18. NISHIHARA 2020, 5–6.

cultivational gaming, martial arts, or the Way of Tea, necessarily consists of both theory and practice. Nishitani too stresses such a necessity, what he calls the “unity of knowledge and activity” (知行合一), in contrast to mere “playing” (遊び), the latter which Nishitani sees as being evident in modern sports and the modern attitude taken towards arts.¹⁹ Moreover, Nishitani adds, this unity is also found, in addition to Buddhist practices such as Dōgen’s *shikantaza* or Shinran’s *nembutsu*, in ordinary activities like “breathing and the drinking of tea.”²⁰ That is, ordinary activities are not “mindless.” Rather, they are performed with a certain knowledge of a holistic framework of ethical conduct in which they are grounded.

Yet to get to that unity of knowledge and action, we need diligent practice, which Hisamatsu analyses through the notion of “one time, one meeting” (一期一会). According to Hisamatsu, the notion of one time, one meeting is related generally to life itself and especially to Tea ceremony, where it means preparedness (心構え) and an attitude of appreciation of the moment at hand cultivated within the ceremony. When hosting a tea ceremony with this preparedness, one comes to understand that the ceremony one hosts exists only in this moment, will not repeat itself, and might in fact be one’s very last moment. Cultivating and acting in accordance with this attitude, the practitioner of the Way of Tea strives to do one’s best in that moment.²¹ Thus, Hisamatsu claims, in turning one’s focus on the present moment and its importance, one comes to understand that one moment contains the totality of one’s existence, resulting in an “affirmation of fullness” of that one moment.²² Through this affirmation, one is freed from obstructing thoughts, which cloud our understanding of our own existence.

Once freed from these obstructions, we can develop as human beings to the point of being able to “do as one pleases” (自在).²³ Undoubtedly such doing as one pleases does not refer to wanton lawlessness. Rather, when one is free from obstructions, we can also speak of “primordial freedom and

19. NKC 20: 56–7.

20. NKC 20: 65.

21. The collected edition of the works of Hisamatsu Shin’ichi, vol.4, 222, 227–228; hereafter HSC.

22. HSC 2: 224.

23. HSC 2: 225

spontaneity” in the sense of existing as oneself.²⁴ Indeed, Hisamatsu calls the activity of being able to do as one pleases “spontaneous” (自発性), i.e., an activity that starts of itself and from oneself.²⁵ Incidentally, we can relate the spontaneity that comes forth of itself to Nishitani’s notion of suchness or *jitai* (自体), the basic ontological concept denoting the existence of the self.²⁶ The self as *jitai* is, essentially, connected to the notion of emptiness, for *jitai* is another way of saying that the self is empty and that this is the fundamental existence of the self. Being in our suchness and connected to emptiness, we can be freed from obstructing thoughts and act spontaneously.

As seen, Hisamatsu thinks we can attain such freedom from obstructing thoughts only through intently focusing on, or deeply delving into, the matter at hand. Intently focusing on the matter at hand demands, according to Hisamatsu, a proper “posture of the heart-mind” (心構え). Such a proper posture becomes, through practice, an “undivided attention” (一心不乱) which, then, enables true learning.²⁷ In other words, one cultivates a state of mind through practice in which one’s posture of the heart-mind, placed in the present moment, does not waver. As a result, one’s sense of practice deepens into a fullness of the present and just doing the thing at hand—not instrumentally but for the sake of that thing itself. Arguably, such an awareness is quite different from our ordinary state of mind and can only be a result of diligent practice.

Hisamatsu further elucidates the meaning of one moment, one meeting in the context of Zen Buddhism, locating it to the fact that one must practice courageously and not with a fearful mind—an attitude to practice which will enable one to become a Buddha.²⁸ In other words, diligent practice is one key to self-cultivation, for it enables one’s growth as a person into something ethically desirable, here designated by the Buddha.

Striving to become a Buddha, one aspires to the highest ideal, to a heightened existence, not to an average standard.²⁹ This is one important aspect

24. Nishihira 2024, 12, 247.

25. HSC 2: 229.

26. Abe 2019, 19–20, 33.

27. HSC 4: 225.

28. HSC 2: 223.

29. Carter 2008, 4.

of self-cultivation, that the practitioner strives towards lofty ideals and is not content with the average. However, achieving such a high ideal is not a given. Still, when one strives towards these high standards, one traverses the “way” (道) towards these ideals.³⁰ When the practitioner traverses the way, they do not ask what to do with one’s life, but how to live it.³¹ Importantly, a way is not instantaneously achieved but must be followed, which then, as precisely that following, will result in realizing one’s own self.³² That is, one must diligently practice to attain one’s ideals, a quest in which human life itself with all its difficulties can be understood to be a stage of self-cultivation.³³ Moreover, it is, I believe, informative that Hisamatsu states that one moment, one meeting is related not only to practice of tea, but also to life itself—i.e., that the attitude of one moment, one meeting not only informs one’s practice but also one’s everyday life.

Considering the ethical side of self-cultivation, it is usually held that self-cultivational arts themselves teach ethical conduct.³⁴ Indeed, as Yuasa notes, Buddhist practice, that is, cultivation, contains a dual significance in that it embraces both ethics as precepts and embodied activity in the form of meditation. Ultimately, the aim of this dual practice is to attain wisdom.³⁵ For the arts as Ways, too, this concern with both ethics and embodied activity is paramount. While it is self-evident that the arts emphasize outwardly visible embodied activity in the form of *kata*, or movements, the inner, ethical side of cultivation is equally important, even if that aspect is not outwardly as visible as the *kata*. Since it is not as easy to perceive, the ethical side might, therefore, be somewhat easy to disregard in everyday practice. However, if one’s practice lacks that ethical aspect, one can only attain outward mastery of forms, not the inner mastery of oneself. In other words, lacking an ethical aspect, the pursuit of wisdom, one’s practice cannot truly be self-cultivational.

Importantly, without embodied practice such wisdom would also

30. CARTER 2008, 4.

31. KASULIS 2018, 32.

32. NISHIHARA 2020, 39–40. Admittedly, this is reading is somewhat in contrast to Hisamatsu’s Rinzaï Zen practice, but I will not go into further detail about this ambiguity.

33. Ibid. 7.

34. CARTER 2008, 1–2.

35. YUASA 1987, 85, 94.

be unattainable. Wisdom, then, relates to both the inner and the outer, embodied activity and spiritual cultivation—in other words, the concept of mind-body unity. Eastern thought has, traditionally, emphasized the unity of mind and body, i.e., their inseparability. For example, Yuasa Yasuo calls the result of this inseparability the “enhancement of the personality and the training of the spirit by the means of the body.”³⁶ Additionally, the term “body-mind” expresses an internal relation between the two, and exploring the unity of body-mind means to explore how the “body and mind intrinsically overlap and function as a unit.”³⁷

However, that unity is “not an essential relation, but rather an achievement.”³⁸ That is, while the body-mind unity is our original or natural state, we have forgotten this and instead learned to take the two as separate.³⁹ The notion of “mind-body unity” and achieving this unity would seem to imply a pre-existing separation between mind and body prior to cultivation. How, then, should we understand that separation, if the unity of mind and body is somehow fundamental to our way of being? One possible, while also tentative, way is through Hisamatsu’s analysis of the “ordinary consciousness.” According to Hisamatsu, ordinary consciousness is one based on opposition: We separate our consciousness from its opposite, i.e., from other beings and their consciousness and conceive them as objects set against our consciousness. The result of this oppositional view is that consciousness takes itself, in addition to objects represented in consciousness, as an object.⁴⁰ Ordinary consciousness is, in other words, not something concretely experienced but rather a consciousness thought of—an object I represent to myself in my consciousness.⁴¹

Applying Hisamatsu’s analysis to the theme of the separation of the mind and the body, that separation can be said to obtain because the mind and

36. YUASA 1987, 85.

37. KASULIS 2018, 29. Interestingly, it should be noted that one aspect of speaking of the “body-mind” is a creative attempt to translate the original term (Jp. *kokoro*) in a manner that can express the cultural difference of placing the mind at the heart rather than the head (see CARTER 2008, 8–9).

38. YUASA 1987, 1.

39. CARTER 2008, 10.

40. HSC 5: 13–14.

41. HSC 5: 13–15.

the body are seen as objects—as my body, as my consciousness. It is I who move *my* body in a certain way and it is I who get stuck within *my* mind; while I move and do things with *my* body, I am thinking in *my* mind. Similarly, the other is seen as an object represented to my consciousness, the two being fundamentally separate. However, Hisamatsu thinks that it is important to overcome these separations, to be completely without form.⁴²

Based on Hisamatsu's analysis of the ordinary consciousness, the goal of self-cultivational practice can be said to be, simply put, the overcoming of the separation between the mind and the body, and between the self and the other. For the idea of mind-body unity contains a possibility to generalize the unification of these two individual elements to “include an awareness of the oneness of self and other, and of self and universe”⁴³—in other words, the I-Thou relation. Through that relation and in cultivating the mind-body unity we can, arguably, discover the inherent ethical dimension present in self-cultivational activity. This places special importance on the real relation the practitioner has with the world and its inhabitants, i.e., the “others” or “Thous” of the world.⁴⁴

When seen in the light of the I-Thou relation, wisdom as the fruit of self-cultivational practice comes to mean the ability to see beyond arbitrary differentiations between oneself and the other, into the ground that inherently connects the two. Following Nishitani, it is possible to claim that such wisdom is non-differentiating (無分別) and arises when one severs “the root of life-and-death;” when wisdom is non-differentiating, a separation between oneself and the beings of the world ceases, enabling one to see these things in their true form (眞実相)—which is “nothing other than non-differentiating wisdom.”⁴⁵ This is what above was called *jitai* and thus contains the aforementioned aspect of “doing as one pleases,” i.e., the possibility to act out of oneself and as oneself.

The ethical dimension of self-cultivation, when seen as a cultivation of non-differentiating wisdom, comes to mean that every other is seen as a “potential friend,” which then provides a foundation for “thinking and act-

42. HSC 1: 39–41; HSC 2: 115; HSC 4: 29–31, 39.

43. CARTER 2008, 13.

44. The notion of I-Thou here is borrowed from Nishitani. See NKC 16, NISHITANI 2004.

45. NKC 11: 25–6.

ing ethically,” because the other is seen to “share the same ground”⁴⁶ with me. Moreover, such a reading suggests a certain understanding of the self, namely, that “emptiness is self.”⁴⁷ That is, non-differentiating wisdom manifests as a “self-awareness of oneself as no-self” (無我としての自己の自覚).⁴⁸ Emptiness can, according to Nishitani, also be understood as a “oneness of matter and mind” (物心一如), suggesting perhaps that Nishitani’s idea of self-awareness of oneself as no-self or as emptiness contains an aspect of self-cultivation, of achieving the mind-body unity.

To conclude, it has been shown that self-cultivational practice must be both diligent and informed by an ethical intention; the latter is both the goal of practice and the medium which grounds one’s practice into real, lived life, enabling one’s practice to transcend mere repetition of outward forms. Moreover, in self-cultivational practice, the practitioner strives towards the unification of the mind and the body, and of the self and the other. Arguably, these two separations and the need to overcome them can be used as pedagogical tools to concretely represent the aspects and aims of self-cultivational practice: Diligent (embodied) practice aims to overcome the separation of the mind and the body, while the ethical intention guiding one’s practice helps to overcome the separation between the self and the other. Through self-cultivational practice both diligent and ethical, the two unifications can be realized and made actual.

MAIN QUEST: SELF-CULTIVATIONAL GAMING

The question now becomes whether playing video games can truly meet the theoretical criteria for self-cultivational practice set in the previous section. This section argues in the affirmative. To do so, these theoretical criteria will be examined in the contexts of and in relation to video games and their various characteristics, in addition to my own experiences of playing video games. In relation to my argument, one important aspect needs to be borne in mind, namely, that I am not claiming that playing video games is an inherently self-cultivational practice. Still less am I claiming that self-

46. See NISHITANI 1982; CARTER 2008, 14.

47. NISHITANI 1982, 138.

48. Ibid. 26.

cultivational gaming is the only possible way to play video games; it is quite possible and even sensible to play video games in other ways too. What I am claiming, however, is that self-cultivational gaming can serve as a guideline which enables gaming to “lead to ethically elevated outcomes.”⁴⁹ It is up to the individual players whether they choose to follow this guideline or not. In any event, what the guideline proposes is a diligent and ethically informed self-cultivational gaming practice, realized when one plays and outside of gaming, in how one comports oneself in everyday life.

As stated, this paper acknowledges that video games can influence the player but does not take a negative approach to that possibility. Instead, an attempt is made here to present an opportunity for “ethical choice and ideological investment” and a “way to connect with a positive ethos for gaming.”⁵⁰ In other words, the possibility of video games influencing the player is here thought of in terms of what would be a desirable change.⁵¹ For Goto-Jones, the roots of such a desirable change lie in “the ethical traditions of martial arts” which, he contends, are similar to MAVs.⁵² I too, will build on that connection while extending it beyond MAVs to Soulslike games.

One might wonder how exactly a genre of video games can be like an embodied martial art. The answer is that in both there is a strong emphasis on learning highly demanding and complex locomotor skills; in martial arts, the *kata*, and in video games, the control schemes of the game. In the context of MAVs and in contrast to most other video game genres, these schemes are mastered for their own sake, whereas in many other genres they are mostly an “instrumental achievement that enables access to and exploration of the virtual world or narrative of the game itself.”⁵³

Arguably, a disciplined practice of self-cultivational gaming can enable, just as it does in the disciplined practice of martial arts, “access to forms of (embodied) knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible or even inconceivable.”⁵⁴ Concretely speaking, when someone plays video games,

49. GOTO-JONES 2016, 14–15.

50. GOTO-JONES 2016, 86

51. Ibid. 15.

52. Ibid. 6, 15.

53. GOTO-JONES 2016, 46.

54. GOTO-JONES 2016, 7.

they sit somewhere and use their fingers to control their character in the game. Gaming is, in other words, always an embodied activity. In self-cultivational gaming, this aspect should not be ignored. Similarly to Japanese self-cultivational arts, where the proper posture is always emphasized, in self-cultivational gaming a proper, or at least upright, posture can be emphasized. An upright posture can be beneficial to the realization of the self-cultivational aspect of gaming: An upright posture enables proper breathing which, in turn, enables the player to properly concentrate on playing. Proper concentration arising from proper posture is, arguably, a form of just such embodied knowledge that can be attained through self-cultivational practice in more traditional forms self-cultivational arts. Drawing on the previous section, disciplined engagement with video games can, in other words, help one restore the mind-body unity and to act as one is in one's thusness, with total focus on the matter at hand.

As in martial arts, it is possible to identify two different motivational contexts in MAVs: one of mastery, the other of performance. In the former, one aims to conquer oneself with a "sincerity of effort," not one's opponent, while in the latter one simply strives to beat one's opponent.⁵⁵ These two contexts correspond to two approaches to gaming, in which one either plays to learn or learns to play; MAVs are usually approached with the former, while the latter approach is more prominently used when playing video games in general.⁵⁶ That is, the mastery-context corresponds to the intention of playing to learn, and the performance-context to the intention of learning to play. The former combination—of mastery and playing to learn—is integral to self-cultivational gaming. Gaming can be self-cultivational when one is motivated to beat oneself, not the game and thus plays to learn, not learns to play. When the player just learns to play and aims to beat the game, gaming is just a form of entertainment, without a self-cultivational aspect. In contrast, when the player aims to beat oneself and learns ways to do it through gaming, the recreational side of gaming recedes to the background, gaming becoming more self-cultivational.⁵⁷

55. GOTO-JONES 2016, 29–30.

56. *Ibid.* 46.

57. To be sure, these two approaches can overlap. For example, in kendo much emphasis is placed both on winning matches and on the self-cultivational side of beating oneself.

As stressed repeatedly, mere diligent engagement does not meet the conditions for self-cultivational practice; an ethical intention must guide that engagement. To these two necessary elements of self-cultivational practice “right motivation” can now be added: Without the motivation to beat or overcome oneself, one’s practice falls short of being self-cultivational, even if that practice is diligent and has a guiding ethical intention. In the context of self-cultivational gaming, the conditions of right motivation, of ethical intention, and of diligence can be presented as follows: When the player aims to beat oneself and thus grow as a person through video games (right motivation), has a set of ethical values guiding that growth (ethical intention), and the necessary discipline to pursue these values (diligent attitude), video games can be a medium of self-cultivation. To be sure, ethical intention in self-cultivational practice can also serve as motivational tool; the practitioner can want to become an ethically mindful person and thus to overcome the self which currently is ethically unmindful.

The general goal of self-cultivational practice can be said to be the betterment of the moral character of the practitioner and attaining the unity of mind and body. At the same time, these must not be something the practitioner gets attached to. Following Dōgen, “[t]he moment you begin seeking the dharma, you move far away from its environs.”⁵⁸ In other words, seeking for enlightenment is just another desire and thus removes us from the realization of enlightenment—realization which is just practicing.⁵⁹ The same holds true for self-cultivational gaming: One just needs to practice, without seeking for any benefit from one’s practice, and results will manifest. In short, a person who practices diligently embodies and realizes the ideals of that practice in one’s everyday existence, no longer has a need to consciously keep the goals of one’s practice in mind.⁶⁰ One just is who one is.

Arguably, Nishitani’s and Hisamatsu’s notions of subjectivity point towards such an understanding of practice and what is the result of practice. For both, the pan-Buddhist notion of no-self (無我), i.e., being without a self and realizing the emptiness of the self, act as a cornerstone of their phi-

58. *Genjōkōan*. DŌGEN 2002, 41.

59. See OKUMURA 2010, 94–6.

60. 諸惡莫作, in DŌGEN 2023, 10.

losophies. Moreover, central to their claims is the concrete practice of that very self.⁶¹

For Nishitani, the empty self is something one must become: “[i]f one becomes completely identified with *muga*, love can come forth. One must strive to be without self.”⁶² Through striving to be without a self, one can access a fundamental wellspring of love and compassion as the source of ethical behavior. As has been argued, albeit in different terms, it is precisely through self-cultivation that we can “strive to be without self,” and can become “completely identified with *muga*.” Importantly, *muga* must be realized (体認) not philosophically, i.e., logically, but must be a “real” understanding, one based on our own experience.⁶³ Similarly, attaining (体得) does not mean to logically comprehend something, but to experientially attain the truth.⁶⁴ Self-cultivational practice is just such a medium through which one comes to embody the truth and the realization attained through practice in one’s very life.

Further, 体得 can be read more literally as “bodily acquiring,” and 体認 as “bodily understanding.” It is thus possible to interpret these concepts of Nishitani to point towards an understanding which occurs expressly in the body, yet is not limited to this body—even though in the context of realization the conceptualization of “body” does include the corporeal aspect of the body.⁶⁵ Instead, “body” here points to something other than corporeality, but not to forgetting that corporeality altogether. Rather, the body belongs to “the entirety of the living self”—living self which, in turn, “belongs to the world around it” and thus “breaks through the skin of the private individual to relate to the environment around it.”⁶⁶ Bodily recognition and bodily awareness thus take place in our way of being itself as existential knowledge, becoming the absolute truth of our existence.⁶⁷ Fundamentally, the way Nishitani here approaches the body does not re-introduce the duality of the

61. On the centrality of practice in the thought of the Kyoto School in general and Nishitani in particular, see SÖDERMAN 2018 and DAVIS 2021.

62. NISHITANI 2012, 77.

63. NKC 10: 9.

64. NKC 10: 9.

65. HEISIG 2001, 251.

66. Ibid. 251–2.

67. NKC 10: 9.

mind-body, nor does it focus on the duality of the subject and the object—both being dualities Nishitani’s philosophy hopes to overcome.⁶⁸

Arguably, then, Nishitani’s understanding of the body and bodily awareness, in connection with his notion of *jitai*, shares a fundamental concern with theories of self-cultivation presented above, namely, the importance both place on attaining an understanding of the oneness of the mind and body, and of the self and the other. As such, understanding Nishitani’s philosophy of *jitai*, the self in its suchness, in the context of self-cultivation is quite informative for both the theory of self-cultivation and the notion of *jitai*. That is, self-cultivation, its goal of attaining understanding of the oneness of the mind and body and of the self and the other, can be understood as the praxis of *jitai*, while *jitai* can be understood as the oneness of both mind and body, self and other, attained through self-cultivation.

On the other hand, as seen in connection to Hisamatsu’s analysis of one moment, one meeting, when one practices courageously and diligently, Hisamatsu claims, this attitude to practice enables one “to become a Buddha.” That is, through diligent and courageous practice one can arrive at self-realization and self-transformation. These are first condensed into the “Great doubt” and then broken through (the “Great Death”), at which point one comes to be as absolutely true self (絶対の真の自己), which is nothing other than Buddha.⁶⁹ However, Hisamatsu stresses that this is no mere theory, but the concrete activity of the bodhisattva (菩薩の行), in which the practitioner returns to the world to work for the benefit of all sentient beings.⁷⁰ In other words, without the ethical intention of compassionate activity for the sake of all sentient beings, one’s practice is incomplete; it cannot be called “self-cultivational” in the proper sense. All in all, video games cannot, in short, be a form of self-cultivation if they are approached with a casual gaming attitude, without any intention in mind to grow as a person. Nor can gaming be self-cultivational if it does not manifest as an ethically orientated attitude outside of gaming.

68. HEISIG 2001, 252.

69. HSC 2: 44.

70. HSC 2: 50.

THE FINAL BOSS: THE UNITY OF THEORY AND PRACTICE

While a self-cultivational approach to gaming is not inevitable, in this section I will argue that Soulslike, though no exception to this rule, are particularly suited for self-cultivational gaming—if one plays them with diligent attitude, accompanied by the right motivation, and informed by an ethical intention. In the following, by drawing on my own experiences of playing these games, I will highlight some aspects of these games that make them suitable for self-cultivational gaming.

Soulslike games usually share the characteristics of a challenging difficulty of the game, perplexing and to an extent interconnected areas, the absence of tutorials, and a minimalistic approach to narrative.⁷¹ In addition, Soulslike games usually have a relatively easy to understand and to learn but hard to master control scheme. Soulslike games do not usually have movements executable through complex combination of buttons. Instead, in a typical case, their control schemes are based on simple acts of striking, parrying, defending (with a shield or a secondary weapon), and evasion. Based on these controls, simple combinations can be executed, e.g., striking straight after rolling, or striking a couple of times in a row.

The difficulty in Soulslike games comes from timing all these actions correctly with the attacks and movements of the enemies in changing areas while, at the same time, taking care that one does not run out of stamina. Without stamina, the player cannot evade attacks, attack themselves, or defend or parry the attacks of the enemies. Thus, while the controls of Soulslike games are rather easy on the surface, the interrelation of all these elements in any given situation gives them great depth. A further result of this complex interrelation is the fact in Soulslike games it is not enough to learn the control scheme to play, one must also play to learn it in more detail. Concretely speaking, the player needs to learn to read the movements of the opponents, to time one's own movements correctly, and to keep an eye on the depleting stamina meter. Arguably, learning these complexities is not possible without a diligent attitude. Incidentally, many who have difficulties beating Soulslike games, often just persevere with the games regardless of how many times they die, trying to get better in playing the game and

71. VELLA 2015.

coming back to it death after death after death. This, I believe, shows that a diligent attitude is always a necessity to play Soulslike games successfully.

Further, in Soulslike games one needs the right motivation to master oneself: In Soulslike games the greatest enemy is not external, but internal. To beat any given enemy in Soulslike games one needs only to do two things: First, when an enemy attacks, one needs to react appropriately by either defending or parrying, or by evading; second, when possible, the player themselves must attack. Naturally, this is easier said than done: Often the player hinders themselves from doing these two simple things effectively. For example, the player can be afraid to die, be overtly focused on executing a given move, on how to correctly react to an incoming threat or they can simply lose focus during a fight. It is therefore necessary to aim for a state of mind in which one is free to act naturally within the situation, not letting one's mind stop anywhere.⁷²

Through right motivation to master oneself and an attitude of diligently putting this motivation into practice, the player can access a region in which unhindered activity can come forth, enabling one to play effectively whilst simultaneously learning “to be without a self” that is afraid or thinks over-much. For when playing Soulslike games, the player must focus completely on the activity at hand, give the game their undivided attention, and be without conflicting thoughts. Otherwise, the player is instantly punished by death, hindering one's progress.

Naturally, it is difficult to reach such a region. We can perhaps liken that difficulty, of “quieting the mind” and “being of one mind without conflict,” to the notion of “fundamental antinomy” present in the philosophy of Hisamatsu. According to Hisamatsu, a fundamental antinomy exists at the foundation of our worldview based on reason: The contradiction between the seeming omnipotence of reason and *de facto* limitedness of reason.⁷³ That is, the rational worldview that dominates our modern existence is based on a fundamentally limited basis—a basis our existence does not recognize.⁷⁴

In the context of Soulslike games the player observes various things and

72. See TAKUAN 2012.

73. HSC 2: 149–150.

74. Ibid. 150.

makes calculations based on these observations. The player must observe, for example, the enemies, the environment, one's own movements in themselves and in relation to the enemies, and the amount of stamina. In short, various considerations assail the player, who can be confident in their ability to correctly react to conclusions derived from these considerations. However, without even noticing it, when the player takes in these considerations, or "forms" to borrow a term from Hisamatsu, one gets stuck in them.⁷⁵ The forms, although important considerations, in fact obstruct one's playing. That is, if the player focuses excessively on any one aspect one needs to take into consideration when playing or tries to take in all information given, one cannot play effectively. Thus, a "fundamental antinomy," a contradiction fundamental to the logic of playing itself, is in effect; on the one hand, one must consider various forms appearing within the game while on the other one just needs to play. That is, the player needs to find skillful and efficient ways to act within the game, to spontaneously react to the varied situations which arise in the game.

According to Hisamatsu, one needs to cut right through the contradiction, straight to its root, and sever it. Then one's activity can flow forth from a subjectivity not bound to forms, that is, from the "Formless Self."⁷⁶ Arguably, such a sphere of activity can be achieved through diligent practice, through which one learns to act without thinking, which encompasses thinking and judgements for the best course of action. However, these are not deliberative acts, but something one does naturally and according to the insight arising from one's practice.⁷⁷ It is spontaneous in the sense given in the first section.

Soul-like games are suitable for self-cultivational gaming also because in playing them, the player confronts one's own limits in skill, awareness, and capability to tolerate the shortcomings in these two, and the stress arising from the constant pressure the game places on the player. When the player confronts these limits, a desire to go beyond them can awaken, in which case the player begins to strive towards self-mastery. Striving towards self-mastery, the player not only cultivates one's skills within the game, but also one's

75. See HISAMATSU 1979.

76. HSC 2: 175, 178.

77. On without thinking, see KASULIS 1981.

mind and self-awareness. As stated, since the effects of such self-mastery and cultivation are of holistic nature, they do not only enable more efficient playing but transform the player outside of gaming too. In other words, the player strives towards a state where they are not hindered by forms arising within the game but can be without a self that is not obstructed by these forms, acting spontaneously and as one pleases.

One further interesting aspect of Soulslike games that makes them suitable for self-cultivational practice is the fact that they cannot be beaten. To be sure, these games do contain a narrative, objectives that, when achieved, will further the narrative towards an end which signals that the player has beaten the game. However, Soulslike games typically contain what is called “new game+,” a possibility to start the game from the beginning with increased difficulty while retaining character progress, items, and upgrades to the character’s equipment from the first playthrough. This, in effect, enables one to play the game *ad infinitum* without ever reaching a conclusive end as there is always the possibility to start one’s journey again.⁷⁸ For these new game + playthroughs can be accumulated to ++, +++, and so on. This results in a possible narrative interpretation of Soulslike games where one strives towards a goal, the main objective of the game, without ever truly reaching the end of that striving.

As an example of this never-ending cycle, we can take the game *Sekiro* (2019) which, perhaps appropriately, is set in feudal Japan. In the game, the player is a *shinobi* known only as “Wolf” and later “Sekiro,” who is tasked with the protection of young vassal of the Ashina clan, Kurō. The game has three phases: in the beginning Kurō, with the help of Sekiro, tries to escape the clutches of the clan; in the middle section Sekiro attempts to return to Kurō after the latter is seized by a member of the Ashina clan who is after Kurō’s immortality; in the last section, Sekiro is reunited with Kurō, setting

78. To be sure, all video games can be played again. However, in more traditional ways of replaying a game character progress etc. do not carry over to the new playthrough, meaning that the player starts the game from scratch, with no indication that they have ever played the game before the playthrough one is about to start. The player certainly does have knowledge about the game and its mechanics, but these do not carry any meaningful weight, since the player does not have access to the skills one knows from further along the game and must instead relearn them. A completely new playthrough is, in a sense, an alternative timeline, while a new game+ takes place on the same continuum as the first playthrough.

his sights on fulfilling Kurō's wish to rid himself of immortality. The game ends with the severing of Kurō's immortality in one of three possible ways. These three phases and their respective objectives—helping Kurō escape, reuniting with him, and helping him get rid of immortality—further the player along the road of mastering the game and as has been argued, oneself, while also signifying the end to one's quest. Yet *Sekiro* does not truly end with the severing of Kurō's immortality. Instead, the player can start one's journey to set Kurō free all over again, simultaneously continuing along the road to self-mastery.

In this interpretation of *Sekiro*, we can see similarities not only to the narratives of self-cultivational arts but to their praxis too. As in *Sekiro*, in self-cultivational arts one learns various techniques and can, outwardly, become rather skilled in them after only practicing for a while—here signified by one playthrough. True mastery of the techniques, knowing their inner principles—which, arguably, means truly knowing oneself—takes prolonged practice, i.e., various playthroughs. In general, in self-cultivational arts one can come to know how to execute a certain technique rather quickly. It is after one knows how to perform a technique, however, when true practice, i.e., honing one's skill, the small minutiae of the technique, begins. In this phase of practice, honing one's skill extends to honing one's mind; in successive playthroughs, the player has become rather skilled in various in-game techniques, but can continue honing one's mind and the accuracy of one's techniques. *Sekiro*, and Soulslike games in general, through their possibility for endlessly honing one's skills and mind through successive playthroughs arguably replicates the idea of continuous practice throughout one's lifetime found in many self-cultivational arts.

It seems, then, that the presence of right motivation and a diligent attitude when playing Soulslike games is not only possible but might even be necessary for playing them successfully. The same cannot, however, be said of ethical intention, the third necessary characteristic of any self-cultivational practice. In a sense, the ethical intention is somewhat of an “add-on” to gaming. Yet this is not a problem: Ethical intention acts as a guideline which the player can freely choose to implement in their engagement with video games should they be so inclined. This is quite similar to self-cultivational arts, especially martial arts, where ethical aspects often become secondary to outward mastery of forms and hierarchical achievements of rank.

While the ethical intention proposed in the present paper has been one based on Buddhist ethics of compassion and of interrelation of all beings, the ethical intention in self-cultivational gaming can be based on other ethical frameworks too. Still, here it has been argued that self-cultivational practice sheds away obstructing forms, making one more and more empty in a Buddhist sense. In other words, self-cultivational gaming here has meant an attempt to realize emptiness and compassion through self-transformation. The argument here has been that through self-cultivational engagement of Soulslike games, one can come to realize the emptiness of oneself. Attained through diligent practice, the motivation to overcome the obstacles and limits of oneself, the player can gain an insight into their true nature as empty and come to manifest that emptiness as a compassionate regard arising from emptiness. As Nishitani states, “small bodily action, as ‘practice,’ is the manifestation of absolute truth” (小さな身体的行いが、「行」として、絶対的な真理の現れである);⁷⁹ and what would be a smaller bodily action than playing video games?

GAME OVER (?)

As stated, in using the philosophies of Nishitani and Hisamatsu as interpreters of self-cultivational theories and as an inspiration for self-cultivational gaming, a self-cultivational element central to their philosophies has been revealed. In Nishitani’s case that element can be seen in his ideas relating to body and bodily realization, and to the notion of realization in itself, which can perhaps be properly understood only in the context of self-cultivational practice. In Hisamatsu’s case a self-cultivational element is, arguably, even more central and observable in his ideas regarding the attitude of one moment, one meeting and the activity of the bodhisattva as an expression of the true self. In the case of both, regarding their philosophies as self-cultivational opens new interpretative horizons within their philosophies.

The present paper has worked within that interpretative horizon to formulate the concept of self-cultivational gaming, which was then applied to so-called Soulslike games. Building also on theories of self-cultivation in general, it has been shown that at the root of any self-cultivational activ-

79. NKC 20: 61.

ity there must be a three-fold basis of right motivation, ethical intention, and diligent attitude. On this basis, it has been argued that self-cultivational gaming, at least of Soulslike games, is a distinct possibility. While the focus in this paper has been on Soulslike games, it is probable that self-cultivational gaming of games from other genres too is possible on this threefold basis.

However, such a claim again raises the question touched upon in the prologue: Can any disciplined activity be self-cultivational, and is not the present exploration merely one more example of the Zen and the art of X approach? As seen in the present paper, discipline and repetition emphasized in Zen and the art of X books alone are not sufficient for an activity to be self-cultivational. In addition to discipline, right motivation and ethical intention are necessary. That is, if an activity lacks the intention of self-mastery, it is merely mindless repetition; if it lacks a guiding ethical intention, it is without the element which elevates it above motivated and diligent practice to a holistically transformative practice.

While Zen and the art of X books, in claiming that Zen and, for example, motorcycle maintenance or the art of archery⁸⁰ are compatible on a fundamental level, might contain some insights, they nevertheless either lack the motivation of self-mastery and/or the ethical intention necessary to give that motivation its aim. In other words, these books are not based on the dual truth of emptiness/compassion fundamental to Buddhism in general and to Zen in particular. Rather than focusing on ethical transformation, they stress repetition, claiming that merely engaging in repetitive action is “Zen-like” and will engender beneficial changes in the person doing these repetitive activities. In so doing, these books advance a mere change in attitude towards life, the aim of which is just to be happier, more present, or the like, not a holistic and ethically orientated transformation of the individual. As such, without the fundamental truth of emptiness/compassion, books promoting “Zen and the art of X” remain capitalistic self-help guides not expressing the truths and insights of self-cultivational arts inspired by Zen and Buddhism.

80. See HERRIGEL 1953 and PIRSIG 1985.

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- NKC 『西谷啓治著作集』 [*Collected Works of Nishitani Keiji*] (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1986–1995), 26 vol.

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