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**Author(s):** Kalmanlehto, Johan

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CHAPTER 23  
**Aesthetic Self-Formation  
in Digital Gameplay  
with Philippe Lacoue-  
Labarthe's Philosophy**

*Johan Kalmanlehto*

In my research, I investigate aesthetic self-formation in digital gameplay with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophy. My idea is that Lacoue-Labarthe's thoughts about art, identity formation, and education are highly relevant in today's world, and deserve greater attention than they have at the moment. Thus, my aim is to highlight the importance of Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophy to the topic of aesthetic formation of the self, as well as what it implies about the relations between art, education, and politics. I also seek to bring Lacoue-Labarthe's thought in contact with today's world by introducing digital culture to my interpretation of his thought. To accomplish this, I examine the relation between digital gameplay and subjectivity.

Lacoue-Labarthe approaches the topic of self-formation with the notions of the subject, mimesis, production, and representation. He describes the subject as something that is produced in discourse, and refers often to the subject of writing as the subject that both produces discourse and is produced by it. The subject is formed through mimesis, imitation of figures, where the self is performed through a character. But mimesis is not repetitive copying because it repeats the same always differently, by supplementing and substituting. This difference alienates the subject from itself, because the represented self appears always as something different than the agent of that representation. Lacoue-Labarthe's deconstructive approach to subjectivity is based on this philosophical problem.

It should be noted that he does not refer to games in any instance, but focuses on more traditional forms of art, and to the demarcation between philosophy and art. My purpose is to show how this problematic can contribute to theoretical understanding of digital gameplay in regards to the subjectivity of the player. With Lacoue-Labarthe, gameplay can be viewed as a space for playing with different presentations of the self, but that is also restrained by the game's programmatic nature.

This is basic research that focuses on the theoretical foundations of art education, as well as philosophy, aesthetics, and digital game studies. My research methods are theoretical; as a philosophical investigation, this study relies on a philosophical method. Because

all research materials consist of texts, my research strategy is related to reading, interpretation, and criticism. The philosophical basis of my research does not form a simple method that can be applied to a given material. By examining Lacoue-Labarthe's argumentation, his main ideas and claims, and the operation that his writing presents, I will construct an understanding of the theoretical problem of formation and presentation of the self. By this process, I will gain theoretical insight into the research problem that is grounded in my interpretation of Lacoue-Labarthe.

As a difficult philosopher, whose texts usually refuse to provide conclusions or definitions, Lacoue-Labarthe cannot simply be read, adopted, and applied. In order to actually do something with his thought, one must bring it forward, re-interpret and even disrupt it. However, to step outside the operation of Lacoue-Labarthe's texts, take something out of them, and then do something with it, is challenging. Lacoue-Labarthe's evasive writing strategy and meticulous philosophical style hamper attempts to use his ideas outside of his own contexts. This is heightened by the fact that he focuses on the limits of theoretical discourse itself. The most difficult task of my investigation—but also the focal point that should make it interesting—is to be able to say something about our encounter with art in a way that is not immediately and obviously present in Lacoue-Labarthe's writing. From this point of view, the task is not to take something out of Lacoue-Labarthe's texts, but to introduce a new thought within them: digital gameplay and the formation of the player's self.

In my research, digital games function as an example, and are approached from theoretical perspective. I use digital game theory to construct an understanding of gameplay as an aesthetic activity, and also to pinpoint specific problems pertaining to the subjectivity of the player. My research is not an investigation of digital games, and thus there are no games as research material. Particular games are referred as examples or cases to support the argumentation, but essential material concerning games consists of theoretical research literature. Examining digital culture against Lacoue-Labarthe's philosophy presents an opportunity to extend his thoughts in a new way.

The significance of my work is in connecting philosophical discourse of aesthetics with digital games. The vast field of previous research on digital games and human-computer interaction references philosophical theories, and many studies also ground their investigations in individual philosophers. In game studies, theories of aesthetics and education are used to bolster the argumentation about games, whereas my research uses games as a tangible example of the philosophical problem that is the focus of my investigation. Thus the point is not to connect a philosophical theory to the investigation of digital games, but to introduce digital games to the theory of aesthetics. Within Lacoue-Labarthean context, this is a challenge that can lead to rewarding outcome.

Lacoue-Labarthe also elaborates how the problem of the subject and its aesthetic substructure is closely related to questions about ethics, education, and the political. This background contributes to the significance of the research, and provides a viewpoint to the educational and ethical aspects of playing digital games. Formation of the self is fundamentally an educational question, because subjectivity always appears in contact with others, and because its formation determines also its ethical character. However, here education must be understood in a wider context than pedagogy. It should also be noted that games are only an example of the reach of Lacoue-Labarthe's thought; the insights provided by my research are not limited to them. By opening up a singular field of contemporary culture, it is possible to understand the processes of aesthetic subject formation in a wider cultural and educational context.