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# A Meta-Synthesis of Agency in Game Studies.

## Trends, Troubles, Trajectories

### ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a meta-synthesis of fifty-nine qualitative and humanistic studies in order to comprehensively examine the research on agency in the field of game studies. By addressing individual studies in their interrelatedness and divergences, a meta-synthesis gauges the tremors of thematic trends and tensions, exposes the assumptions that undergird a field's conceptual apparatuses, and draws out fresh nuances from the central topic. Ultimately, this paper advocates against totalizing views of agency and contends that gaming agencies are plural potentialities that are always negotiated, always contingent, and always in flux.

**KEYWORDS:** *agency; embodiment; meta-synthesis; player agency; illusory agency; nonhuman agency*

### INTRODUCTION

At this point, it seems that much of the field of game studies functions in response to Murray's (1997) conviction that agency is an aesthetic experience that is essential to our encounters with video games. Studies on agency in video games have proliferated during the last two decades. Their ever-increasing reach and frequency in the young field have ensured that agency is no obscure nook of scholarship, but is a growing foundational premise of game studies research. The frictions of this rapid expansion have sparked various deliberations and disagreements. Some research segments have crystallized around shared interests, concerns, and objectives. Others have broken away to develop along separate tracks, often making only minimal contact with other entrenched camps, the drifting fragments of nascent concepts, and the old and new theories of agency that lie outside the field's borders.

Buried beneath these expansive debates about agency in video games, the formations of common theories and the fractures of contested concepts rever-

berate across and beyond the field. Yet, even as the magnitudes of their impacts intensify, their political lodes and necessary interrelationships remain concealed under the surface. To bring these repercussions to light, I have conducted a meta-synthesis that maps, compares, and critiques various strands of research on agency that crisscross the field. The methodological equipment of a meta-synthesis is especially befitted to foreground the ideological work of a field's definitions and conceptualizations, to wrest out the subterranean currents of power that churn among theories.

A set of central questions guides this study: 1) How has the field of game studies defined and conceptualized agency? 2) What are the assumptions underpinning the field's understandings of agency? 3) What are the relationships between these theoretical configurations, both in terms of their thematic subject matter and the networks of their citational practices within and outside of the field? And finally, 4) Why has agency assumed such a prominent position in game studies scholarship in the first place?

In seeking answers to these questions, this meta-synthesis tosses some ideas into the constant flows of conceptual change and it signals several possible directions for future research. By gathering together and examining many similar and many divergent perspectives, this study advocates against totalizing views of agency and contends that gaming agencies are plural potentialities that are always negotiated, always contingent, and always in flux. My hopes are that its results are generative, that it bolsters connections to disciplines outside of game studies, and that it builds conduits for needed re-politicizations of agency in the field.

## METHODS

A *meta-synthesis* is a type of qualitative meta-analysis, a methodological approach that allows researchers to aggregate, summarize, and understand the findings of primary qualitative studies in a particular field. In short, the purpose of qualitative meta-analyses is to *study the studies*. In doing so, qualitative meta-analyses can pursue various ends, including “the development of a new understanding, a need to reconcile conflicts in the literature, the identification of central findings in an entire literature...the desire to raise critical consciousness about shortcomings or biases in a literature” (Levitt, 2018, p. 367), and so on. Researchers have, therefore, constructed various forms of qualitative meta-analysis, whose specific processes depend on a study's goals. *Meta-synthesis* surfaced to distinguish those forms of qualitative meta-analysis whose purposes are more interpretive than aggregative (Timulak, 2009). A meta-synthesis “is about the comparative textual analysis of qualitative findings” (Jensen & Allen, 1996, p. 554). Addressing individual studies in their interrelatedness and divergences, a meta-synthesis can gauge the tremors of thematic trends and tensions, expose the assumptions that undergird a field's conceptual apparatuses, and draw out fresh nuances from the central topic.

The goal of a meta-synthesis is not to aggregate every source that pertains to or mentions a specific topic. In fact, a sample size that is too large can “impede deep analysis and, therefore, threaten the interpretive validity of findings” (Sandelowski, Docherty, & Emden, 1997, p. 368). As such, there were necessary limits that I needed to place on my selection of studies. These decisions are not neutral acts, as they involve inclusions and exclusions, elevating certain ideas at the expense of others, and contributing to decisions about what constitutes an academic field. To establish parameters in accordance with the project’s goals, I selected sources from academic publications and examined primarily those writings that focus on agency as their central subject matter. I have, however, made exceptions for certain studies that generate distinctive approaches to gaming agency, even if agency is not their principal topic.

My procedure for gathering sources resembled Bates’s (1989) *berrypicking model*. Berrypicking does not insist that the synthesist knows their selection process in advance. Rather, it embraces the erraticism and non-linearity of data retrieval, in which each new piece of information can lead to new ideas, new referential tracks, and new directions for search inquiries. Its collection process is one of continual evolution. When setting off on my search, I began with a few central hubs of game studies research and some well-traversed writings. But I also endeavored to make my process one of excavation. I did not rely solely on highly cited articles, but sought out studies that had slipped through the cracks of the field’s common citational practices. Ultimately, I wound down my search when I felt that I was reaching *saturation*, a principle that commonly guides data collection in meta-analytic methods. Saturation is the point at which new sources cease yielding new understandings, and is thus a “rationale to end the collection of primary research as the findings meet the research goal of developing new understandings of the literature—even if all the primary studies were not reviewed” (Levitt, 2018, p. 374). I concluded this meta-synthesis with fifty-nine sources, though I also cite a number of related texts throughout the discussions of these studies.

After locating and reading each source, I took notes, catalogued each study individually, and then gradually grouped them together within specific thematic categories. As my data retrieval continued, some of my categories and findings changed, producing necessary restructurings and further searches for related studies. Many of the studies fell into more than one category, hinting at the complexities of their definitions of agency and the interrelationships among them. These categories served as elastic organizational codes, as starting points for the process of synthesis rather than as static, enveloping end goals.

In what follows, I report on my findings in answer to the project’s core questions. I begin with an overview that summarizes overarching trends and issues in efforts to define agency in video games. From there, I have organized the meta-synthesis according to the broad thematic categories that emerged over the course of the study: narrative agencies; agency and embodiment; agency as

illusion; true agency; and challenges to the passive–active binary. These headings do not represent cohesive or united bodies of literature; rather, they indicate core research topics and areas of deliberation. Following these analyses of game studies literature, I conclude that agency in video games is perhaps better understood as *plural modalities*, rather than as occurring on spectra of more–or–less, true–or–illusory, or active–or–passive.

## FINDINGS

### I. Overview

Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) was not the first piece of scholarship to posit agency as an essential feature of gameplay experiences. For instance, Wardrip-Fruin et al. (2009) point to an earlier iteration of the concept in Buckles's (1985) dissertation, in the form of *effectance*, a player's desire to feel competent in gaming environments. Nevertheless, game scholars widely credit Murray with the origination of the concept as applied to video games. Agency's uptake in the field—as opposed to a term like *effectance*—is likely a consequence of its use in common parlance and its extant significance in fields such as sociology and philosophy. Murray's precise definition in this context is that agency “is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (p. 126). In the years since *Holodeck*'s publication, this definition has become a steady launching point for many studies, prevalent to the point of platitude. Perhaps as a result, many studies take for granted that readers already know what *agency* means. Constructions of precise definitions, efforts to unpack definitions, and recourse to definitions of agency outside of game studies are uncommon. Agency floats across the field, omnipresent but ever nebulous. I am by no means suggesting that every study must include an exact definition of agency, rigorously interrogate Murray's concept, or strive for a uniformity of usage. As I mentioned earlier, I aim to promote pluralities of agencies, whether plural definitions, modes of agency, human agencies or non-human agencies. But I also want to make note of the lingering fogginess of this term, which is an effect of widespread presumptions about common starting grounds. These presumptions have shaped conformities in the ways much of the field has handled the concept, which have in turn perpetuated uncertainties about what comprise agentic phenomena in video games.

Two further definitions may help us begin to think through these ambiguities as we move through this meta-synthesis. One is Schott's (2006) paraphrasing of Murray: “it is the subjective experience of ‘agency’ that players seem to desire from their engagement with gameplay: they need to feel that they have exerted power or control over events” (p. 134). Agency, therefore, “implies that the player...explores and manipulates the environment and seeks to influence it” (p. 134). The other emerges in Calleja's (2011) comments that players are “active participants in the creation of their experience through interaction with the code during gameplay” and that agency “in virtual environments is the

ability to perform actions that affect the game world and its inhabitants” (p. 55). The blurry overlap at the core of these definitions is a clandestine instigator of several unresolved debates in the field. Is the “satisfying power” of agency an *experience* that video game designs engender? Or is agency a *capacity* to create actual, concrete, observable change, based on specific actions and choices? Or is it both: a capability that produces a corresponding experience? Is the experience alone sufficient for agency? Furthermore, is agency inherent and exclusive to human beings, but somehow facilitated by video games designs? Or do video games also possess or express forms of agency of their own? And what can we say about the agencies at work that have contributed to the very creation of video games—their designs, software, platform—and facilitated the moment of encounter between player and game?

Across this study, I often witnessed *agency* used synonymously—at times interchangeably—with a number of other words, including but not limited to: freedom, choice, control, autonomy, and action. Further muddling the concept is the fact that agency has also developed close affinities with a number of other contested concepts in game studies, such as *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), interactivity, immersion, and presence. In particular, interactivity has flared into a persistent hotspot of attention in relation to agency. Many scholars laud interactivity and agency as interlocked phenomena that together create the unique experience of gameplay. Others are critical of these outlooks, finding dire import in the allures of their false promises. Still others strike a sort of middle ground, dousing long-smoldering disputes by shifting away from interactivity to embrace agency as the more apt descriptor of the specificities of video games. The field could benefit from further research that is dedicated to charting and inspecting the terminological networks that connect agency to these other murky concepts.

Agency research has also habitually abstracted *the player* into a faceless, unvarying monolith. Although this is consistent with the field’s usual approaches, it becomes especially pronounced and troublesome in a body of scholarship whose fundamental tasks involve grappling with issues of human subjectivity, desire, and power. It is even more unsettling when considering the regularity with which the field proposes sweeping, prescriptive visions of agency or makes universalizing claims about player response to certain games or designs. Despite the many efforts to structure video games in anticipation of player agency, if agency is an experience, then it “is a subjective one that varies over time, not something that is a static feature of a given game” (Grodal, 2003, p. 150). Occasionally, studies may offer typologies of players or clarify that their models apply only to specific player types (e.g. Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum, 2009). Yet, these rare instances only go so far in capturing the radical variability of players and their experiences with video games. These problems and their consequences will unfold throughout this meta-synthesis.

## II. Narrative Agencies

A prominent wing of agency scholarship carries on the legacies of Murray's theories by exploring the attributes of narratives in digital environments. In addition to identifying and describing the unique qualities of digital narratives, many of these studies also seek to cultivate design strategies that would optimize and harness players' experiences of agency in equilibrium with the expressive intentions of authors (Mateas & Stern, 2000; Harrell & Zhu, 2009; Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum, 2009; Wardrip-Fruin et al., 2009; Joyce 2016a). The bedrock of this literature is the belief that agency is an experience that players seek out in video games—and it is an experience that effective balances of ludic and narrative designs can satisfy. Design philosophies in this area typically preserve intentionality as a key condition of agency. They seek to anticipate, entice, and reflect a sense of intentionality in the actions that players take, in the choices that they make, and in the resulting feedback and outcomes.

Tones of idealization have often resonated across scholarship on narrative agency. “Video games,” writes Thorne (2018), “are often promoted as a medium for multilinear storytelling that allows players to make meaningful choices that affect narrative outcomes” (p. 353). With wording reminiscent of Murray, Thorne implicates not only industry marketing rhetoric, but also narrative designers and scholars. Indeed, fabled ideals have energized work on digital narratives well before the consolidation of game studies as a discipline. Ryan (2001) writes of two narrative myths that have been inspiring, but that have also raised unachievable expectations that can only lead to disappointment: the myth of the Aleph and the myth of the Holodeck. Both represent imagined narrative forms that would structure player experience even as they dynamically, seamlessly adapt to player input. To the present, many “interactive narrative approaches still often seem to hold the holodeck as a holy grail and offering the user a sense of free will in a story world is still held as a goal” (Harrell and Zhu, 2009, p. 45). As scholarly theories, design patterns, and commercial promotions ooze into one another, players formulate derivative expectations. Joyce (2016b) advises that these very expectations can shape players' experiences of agency.

But narrative agency is not just about making choices that lead to different branching outcomes. For some, it is also about how video games address players as moral agents, inviting them to accept their *complicity* within the ethical dilemmas, character developments, and branching narrative paths of gameworlds (Sicart, 2013). Complicity “fosters the sense that players have a responsibility for what happens on-screen, since they often have direct control over on-screen events and a vested interest in keeping the protagonist alive” (Smethurst & Craps, 2015, p. 277). Narrative agency is, then, also the *representational* power of performing as a character within a game's procedures and environments (Joyce 2016a), an idea that is also related to the concept of *embodiment*, a topic that we will discuss more thoroughly below.



While some scholars have denied the impacts of representation on experiences of play (Newman, 2002; Aarseth, 2004), there is ample scholarship that stresses the centrality of representation in matters of narrative agency, moral complicity, and embodiment, especially pertaining to issues of identification, gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability. These considerations carry great import because—as we will discuss more in the final section—ascriptions of *agency* and *passivity* assign hierarchical subject positions in hegemonic discourses. Mainstream game design overwhelmingly affirms agency as the exclusive purview of masculinity, whiteness, heterosexuality, and able-bodiedness. Those at the margins remain relegated to passivity. Stang (2018), for instance, remarks on the glorification of violent male agency in mainstream games, which comes at the expense of women characters, who are objects, objectives, and resources awaiting exploitation. Through a reading of *The Last of Us*, Russworm (2017) underscores how “blackness labors to shore up white character agency” (p. 112), as the game’s black characters die in order to ensure the self-actualization and relational bonding of the white player-characters. These examples further demonstrate that agency—whether in game design or in game studies research—is also, by and large, the exclusive purview of *players*, whose common abstraction also prefigures subjects who are white, able, hetero-cis-male. Non-player characters (NPCs) serve only in instrumental roles for player utilization. Player agency has been the field’s main preoccupation; but the field has been far less willing to accede nonhuman, machine, or material agencies.

What we’re left with, then, is a haunting uncertainty concerning the agentic status of in-game characters, whether playable or not. Among the few examples of research that makes space for character agency is Harrell and Zhu’s (2009) concept of *system agency*, which draws on actor-network theory (ANT) to account for the capacity of computational systems to control characters during the process of generating narrative. Russworm (2017) explicitly designates character agency as a necessary element for narratives that deal critically with issues of representation and identity. To this end, prohibitions of player control over narrative progression and character development—including over player-characters—can be imperative. To demonstrate, Russworm details the complexities of non-interactive cutscenes in *The Walking Dead*’s construction of black subjectivity. Cutscenes that disallow player intervention ensure that Lee is always a compassionate father figure to Clementine, thereby foreclosing any possibility of players crafting a stereotypical, negative portrayal of black fatherhood. But cutscenes also perpetuate white anxieties about black subjectivity by, for instance, forcing Lee into handcuffs at the game’s conclusion, thus reinstating the relationship of black masculinity to the prison industrial complex.

Additionally, Tulloch, Hoad, and Young’s (2019) analysis of *Gone Home* sketches a blueprint for how we may begin to conceive of not only NPC agency, but also the agency of player-characters apart from players. The focal point of their study is an instant in which the player-character, Katie, refuses player

prompting to read a diary entry about her sister's first sexual experience with another girl from her school. In this way, Katie acts as an agent against sexual oppression, refusing to expose her sister's privacy to prying heteronormative gazes without her sister's consent. Furthermore, Tulloch, Hoad, and Young's reading of *Gone Home* rejects totalizing conceptualizations of agency that center player choice and control; instead, it traces the fluctuations and contingencies of Katie's agency. Katie's role in the narrative is "a passive observer and outsider to past events, rather than an active participant in them" (p. 344). Yet, Katie also exerts agency against players' snooping. And yet still, though *Gone Home* may position Katie as a queer ally, the game's colorblind attendance to Katie and her family also reinstates oppressive racial politics by leaving narrative agency situated solely in upper-middle-class white normativity.

Yet, as Hutchinson (2017) maintains, our assumptions about who is playing a game and how they *embody* playable characters within a game's narrative necessarily shape our understandings of both representation and agency.

### **III. Agency and Embodiment**

Tightly knotted with those other fuzzy concepts *interactivity*, *immersion*, and *presence*, embodiment can be tricky to unravel—fortunately, there is a hefty and growing literature dedicated to doing so. Embodiment research positions corporeal existence as central to the experiences of playing video games. While rhetorics of immersion may tantalize players with promises to leave behind the lived body—or to at least blur the borders between player's bodies and virtual gameworlds—video game play is intractably fleshy. Lahti (2003) observes of this paradox that, on the one hand, video games may seem to "emphasize an immaterial and disembodied vision," but on the other hand, they function precisely by "locating knowledge and experience firmly in the familiar terrain of the body" (p. 168). The result, as Gregersen and Grodal (2008) explain, is that "interacting with video games may lead to a sense of extended embodiment and sense of agency. . . it is an *embodied awareness in the moment of action*, a kind of *body image in action*" (p. 67).

A key focus of such research, then, concerns the ways that video games "distribute embodiment across actual/virtual worlds in complex and irreducible ways" (Keogh, 2018, p. 8). Dovey and Kennedy (2006) describe how embodied gameplay spans players' skillful handling of material objects; their social, cultural, temporal, and spatial contexts; and their re-embodiment within and beyond the screen, especially as player-steered avatars. Keogh (2018) likewise elaborates on how players feel bodily *present* in gameworlds even as they remain aware of their corporeal existence and actions in the actual world. These embodied entanglements of player and video game demonstrate that "it is impossible to ignore the role of nonhuman process in constituting our sensorial perception" (Keogh, 2018, p. 7). Embodiment scholarship thus accounts for not only how players shape gameworlds, but also how video games impact the



partial, situated, distributed subjectivities and sensoria of players. As such, these literatures tend to emphasize nonhuman agencies to a greater extent than other areas of agency research.

Cybernetics has therefore emerged as a prevailing framework with which to comprehend the relationships between the embodied agencies of players and material agencies of video games. In particular, a number of scholars have employed the image of the cyborg to characterize the hybrid conditions of intertwined human and machine subjectivity, consciousness, and action (Friedman, 1999; Lahti, 2003; Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Kennedy, 2006; Keogh, 2014; Keogh, 2018), though with differing conclusions about the cyborg's implications for agency. Friedman's (1999) *cyborg consciousness* posits that video games teach players "structures of thought...by getting [them] to internalize the logic of the program" (p. 136). Lahti (2003) cautions that video games can commodify players' cyborg desires by enabling them to exercise control over the kinds of bodies they desire. But for Keogh (2018), cyborgian hybrids of human and nonhuman agencies can challenge hegemonic commercial and scholarly discourses that treat agency as a matter of players' freedom, control, and autonomy. And Kennedy (2006) instead mobilizes cyborg subjectivities to call attention to the empowering and transgressive pleasures of women playing video games.

Meanwhile, a separate, compact group of scholarship convenes near these research assemblies on embodiment, but sidles away to comb the darker corridors of the horror genre. Although the group of studies on the horror genre is a relatively small one, it is also robust, exhibiting a number of peculiarities that distinguish it from other research on agency—particularly embodied agencies—in video games. First and foremost is that horror genre scholarship in game studies is rooted in the traditions of horror genre scholarship in film studies. The film studies substrate has fed a growth of agency scholarship that firmly acknowledges continuities across media forms, even as it also strives to identify the specificities of horror video games.

Scholars have recognized that the elicitation of fear connects the genre across media forms. Yet, the timbre of this fear differs in horror video games due to their necessary "act of *doing* that extends beyond the kinetic and emotional responses that are common in cinema" (Krzywinska, 2002, p. 207). Perron (2005) refers to this version of fear as a type of *gameplay emotion*. Unlike spectators of horror films, players of horror video games must intervene in the gameworld's events. Krzywinska (2002) is adamant, however, that this does not mean that film spectatorship is entirely passive in contrast to some imagined superior activeness in video games. Familiarity with the complexities of spectatorship has enabled horror scholarship to dodge such pitfalls that have attracted celebratory strains of game studies research on agency. It has also resulted in a view of player agency with a distinct set of priorities.

Seeking to fathom the pleasure of fear as a gameplay emotion, horror scholars have been especially interested in undulations of agency during gameplay.

Krzywinska (2002) writes that the oscillating “dynamic between being in control and then out of control is crucial to the production of the experience of such paradoxical states” (p. 218). Some scholars have set out to identify precisely those elements in horror video games that manipulate player agency to evoke fear, using formulations like player agency parameters (Boonen & Mieritz, 2018) and agency mechanics (Habel & Kooyman, 2014). These theorizations have accentuated the significance of character embodiment in fluctuations of agency, largely due to the fact that the central struggle and source of fear in many horror games revolves around the survival of the player-character’s body (Perron, 2009). The player-character’s survival depends not only on the player’s capabilities to execute skillful techniques, but also to cope with dreadful threats and losses of control.

Horror scholarship’s unique contributions to understandings of embodied agencies in video games pertain to theories of *gaze*, a concept with far less emphasis in other realms of agency scholarship. The concentration on gaze is no doubt a consequence of the film studies lineage: gaze has long been a concern of cinematic horror studies. Pinpointing gaze as a site of player agency, horror scholars thus distinguish mechanisms of gaze as among the most significant differences between cinematic horror and ludic horror (Krzywinska, 2002). Habel and Kooyman (2014) compare the plurality of gazes available to spectators of horror films with the narrowed first- or third-person identification with the player-character in video games. Perron (2009) suggests that third-person is the prevailing perspective for horror games, because it “intensifies the corporealized sensations” (p. 132). Agentic gazing in horror games has also been a subject of my own work (Jennings, 2018). With a feminist reading of Ada Wong’s chapter in *Resident Evil 6*, I elaborate on *feminine gaze* as a way to “conceptualize gameplay as an open, agentic potentiality for expressions and performances of femininity” (p. 239). The framework demonstrates how playing as Ada both conforms to and defies theories of women’s gazes in cinematic horror.

Although undulating agencies are at the pulsating heart of horror scholarship, this is not the case for all game studies research. As we will see more ahead, manipulations of player agency can also carry far bleaker insinuations.

#### ***IV. Agency as Illusion: Obedience, Forced Choice, and the Legacy of BioShock***

It is difficult to overstate the significance of *BioShock* on the field’s perceptions of agency. The game, along with its sequels, has stirred up waves of scholarship about choice, free will, and control, especially in relation to the degree to which *BioShock* does or does not succeed as a critique of both Randian objectivism and the medium of video games. As Parker (2015) explains, *BioShock* is a prestige text,

designed from the ground up to invite sustained reflection, debate, and criticism, as evidenced by the countless forum discussions, blog posts, essays, articles, chapters, theses, and even academic monographs it has produced. This is not just a game

with something to say, but a game worth saying something about—a game that justifies the whole enterprise of game criticism and scholarship. (p. 14)

A formidable bulk of these writings on the *BioShock* franchise deals specifically with issues of agency. In turn, this has resulted in a disproportionate amount of scholarship on agency that is specifically about *BioShock*, much of which declares that agency in video games is an illusion. Of the fifty-nine studies that I examined for this meta-synthesis, fifteen use *BioShock* or its sequel, *BioShock: Infinite*, as primary case studies. This corpus thus reflects a significant percentage of agency research. And to be sure, there are many more studies on *BioShock* that I have not included here.

Even if the many writings on *BioShock* have ultimately consecrated the concept, illusory agency predates the post-Rapture flood. In one example, MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2007) characterize illusory agency as resulting from design strategies that trick players into the belief that they have a greater impact in the game than they actually do. In another, Charles (2009) concludes that video games are *faux-scriptible texts*: they invite players to engage with them interactively, but they grant only illusions of agency. They only satisfy players' desires for agency by sublimating those desires. Charles's admonition is that this process thereby dissolves players' desires for participatory citizenship, subsuming them into manufactured subjectivities and interpretive passivity. Notions of interactivity and agency, to Charles, are not only misleading—they are disempowering.

For many scholars, *BioShock* is decisive proof of this illusory agency. It is a video game that critiques video games. It mocks players and lambasts the celebratory discourses of empowerment, choice, and freedom. To make this case, scholars have consistently focused on the notorious scene in which Andrew Ryan reveals that the phrase "Would you kindly?" forces the player-character, Jack, into obedient, mind-controlled action—and then orders Jack to murder him with a golf club while repeating the mantra that "a man chooses, a slave obeys." It's worth noting that, despite the myriad deep analyses of this scene, there is scant commentary on the racial overtones of Ryan's now-infamous refrain. At the same time, it is precisely here that we find pronounced dilemmas in parsing the provenances, authorizations, and relationships between autonomous activities and assigned passivities.

The literature on *BioShock* involves much fine-grained quibbling over the details of this twisted scene and the game's central choice of whether to rescue or harvest the Little Sisters (Sicart, 2009; Tulloch, 2010; Aldred and Greenspan, 2011; Wysocki and Schandler, 2013; Owen, 2013; Jackson, 2014; Schubert, 2015; Chang, 2017; Henthorn, 2018; Stang, 2019). Each individual contribution plots points along a spectrum of degrees to which *BioShock* either complicates player agency or obliterates it. But altogether, much of this literature harmoniously asserts that *BioShock* reveals that video game agency is an illusion and that there are, therefore, no real choices in video games. The ensu-

ing tendency is to extrapolate *BioShock*'s messages into broader lessons about the very nature of video games as a medium. "Video games," write Wysocki and Brey (2018) in an essay about the *BioShock* franchise, "operate as systems of control, masking the 'non-agency' of players behind apparent choices that in the end prove empty," (p. 417). From *BioShock*, Tulloch (2010) determines that "Video games work by constructing the player's subjectivity" (p. 36). And Jackson (2014) claims that *BioShock* "contributes to an understanding of how videogame entertainment packages...decide in advance and indirectly reveal a structure of the forced choice, like all computational systems" (p. 38).

A number of these analyses hinge on interrogations of how video games compel players to obey. To Tulloch (2010), *BioShock* demonstrates that playing a video game is a pedagogic process of learning to obey a ludic system. Wysocki and Schandler (2013) modify Andrew Ryan's refrain into a statement about playing any video game: "What else can be said except perhaps 'A man chooses. A gamer obeys?'" (p. 207). And Wysocki and Brey (2016) conclude that the "act of playing *BioShock*, or any game, requires a player to give up control, to obey the algorithms of the game, even as these algorithms cast the illusion of control" (p. 153). Both Aldred and Greenspan (2011) and Chang (2017) build from the work of Galloway (2006) to scrutinize the strategies whereby video games evince player agency in order to obscure their algorithmic and proto-logical control. Aldred and Greenspan (2011) read *BioShock* as an allegory of the conflicting procedures of convergence, which at once glorify abundances of choices even as they mandate that players must passively "consume converged content in the order and fashion desired by media producers, and accept that the choices and agency they are given are illusory at best" (p. 482). Moreover, they observe that, despite *BioShock*'s outward critiques of consumerism and narratives of technological progress, the game nonetheless "subtly recuperate[s] the power of corporate capitalism" (p. 481).

Chang (2017) likewise illuminates *BioShock*'s efforts to elude its own critique by recuperating the very objects of its condemnation. Expanding on Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) *immersive fallacy*, Chang refers to the rhetoric of open movement, freedom, action, and choice that surrounds mainstream gaming as an *interactive fallacy*. According to this fallacy, video games invite interaction, "convincing players to suspend disbelief to believe that they are in full control of the action even as they consent to the rules and limits of the game" (p. 230). *BioShock* critiques precisely this faith that players presumably place in their control over a video game. But in the end, the game simply ushers players back into the interactive fallacy with reassurances of posthuman agency. Chang's queer reading of *BioShock* moves beyond the confrontation with Ryan to zoom-in on how the pair of endings reveals the game's recuperative project. The bad ending simply reprimands players as villainous. But the good ending rewards the very individuality and agency that the game ostensibly denounces. The prizes are decidedly patriarchal and heteronormative: "life, liberty, and the pursuit of mar-

riage, children, and family” (p. 240). For *BioShock* to have ended by hoodwinking players, by killing Jack at Ryan’s hands, “would indeed be too threatening—too queering—to the ideals and ideologies that ensure the gaming industry and the larger gaming culture’s popularity, profitability, and status quo” (p. 239).

Additionally, a few scholars have stressed the fact that players “do not need to be asked kindly to kill others” (Henthorn, 2018, p. 219) in order to proceed through a game—and *BioShock* wallows in this violence even as it reprimands players for agreeing to it. Wysocki and Schandler (2013) note that *BioShock* has no qualms in asking players to continue slaughtering people immediately after indicting players for following orders in Ryan’s horrific murder. Further, Henthorn specifically spotlights the game’s violence against women’s bodies, particularly in the dependence of *BioShock*’s central choice on the disposability and exploitability of the Little Sisters. Leaving players to choose whether to rescue or harvest the Little Sisters reveals not only that players’ agency is restricted, but also that young girls have even *less* agency.

While the literature on *BioShock* has yielded sophisticated readings and indispensable perspectives, the arching concept of an *illusion of agency* is a wobbly platform from which to build. Owen’s (2013) commentary on *BioShock* hints at why. For Owen, even illusory agency is productive of actual, potent affects, including feelings of empowerment, emotional investment, and moral culpability. For illusory agency, the fogginess that we discussed earlier is especially thick. For an *illusion* of agency to exist, then there must be a *true* agency out there somewhere. And indeed, the writings on illusory agency are peppered with comments about video games’ inherent inability to achieve full agency (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler, 2007), absolute agency (Tulloch, 2010), true agency (Aldred & Greenspan, 2011), or true control (Owen, 2013). What, though, is true agency? Does it exist outside of video games? Is an experience of agency not sufficient for true agency? If agency is an experience, what about this experience is an illusion? What would it take for agency to be true?

Part of the issue appears to be an implicit equation of *agency* with *choice* and *variable, corresponding, observable outcomes*, evinced by the perennial preoccupation with *BioShock*’s false or forced choices. The *BioShock* corpus appears to be simultaneously utilizing and recoiling from a strict interpretation of Murray’s definition of agency. At the same time, the cynical conclusions about player agency—i.e. that *BioShock* exposes the truth that all video games manipulate players’ actions and constrain players’ choices—seem starkly at odds with the branches of work on narrative agency and the horror genre, both of which take designed manipulations of player agency as necessary and even desirable givens. Nonetheless, the literature on *BioShock* forms a crucial critical outlook on player agency, enabling a glimpse into veiled implications that other agency research has been less likely to contemplate. To better grasp these implications, though, we must first unearth more from its dusty impressions of *true agency*.



### V. True Agency?: Authorial Control and Creative, Collective Interventions

True agency in relation to video games appears to be somewhere outside of a video game, having something to do with authorship, content creation, or metagaming. Aldred and Greenspan (2011) hint that only illusory agency is possible in the passive, exhaustive consumption of playing *BioShock*; true choice would require opportunities for players' creative interventions in the form of mods, cheats, hacks, or other metagames external to gameplay. Stang (2019) similarly contends that true agency does not lie in pre-scripted narratives, but instead arises in players' collective activities in fan communities and in efforts to influence game developers to directly impact the authorship of video games. Whereas Murray (1997) sought to correct the enthusiastic declarations that narrative agency was equal to authoring an experience—"This is not authorship but agency" (p. 153)—the notions of true agency instead claim that in-game agency is not agency, but that content creation and collective interventions in authorship are.

On the one hand, some scholars view these creative agencies as channels through which players can actively, critically construct video games, rather than passively succumbing to games' demands for obedience and consumption. For instance, in an effort to rethink agency in video games, Frasca (2001) imagines a version of *The Sims* in which players could construct characters using open-source building blocks. Frasca believes that, although this does not mean that players would become authors, the exercise of programming would enhance players' participatory freedom and critical capacities. Additionally, Stang (2019) regards collective player action as an agentic mechanism for ensuring that players' desires are reflected in the games they play. By engaging in dialogue with developers to change the content of video games,

players can truly exercise agency and even create a reversal of power structures: while normally the developer dictates the player's actions through the very structures of the game, in these cases, the players are dictating how the game's narrative should respond to their actions. (para. 28)

But on the other hand, in the effort to preserve critical game designs, some scholars are wary of applauding such levels of player control over authorship. Gesturing to the sway of player expectations over popular game design, Thorne (2018) concludes that the "challenge for developers is to find a space for critical games in an industry that is driven by player demands" (p. 372). To carve spaces for critical game designs and to amplify the voices of marginalized designers, there is cause to recognize and sustain authorial agencies, to deny boundless choice for players, and to disrupt player control as a means of disrupting the status quo (Marcotte, 2018), whether in gameplay or in the exertion of collective will on game authorship. The power relationships surrounding video game authorship "are constantly in flux, perpetually negotiated, and are not the same



from one game to the next” (Jennings, 2016, p. 133). Collective player actions can organize around causes of justice and challenges to power, but not necessarily. They can also be violently subjugating. If collective player intervention is the site of true agency, then the online gamer-harasser also rises to the status of idealized true agent.

Criticizing the abundant research on creative player activities, Behrenshausen (2012) asserts that the field has constructed a romanticized player “who does not *merely consume* media contents or artifacts, but also *produces* something... by engaging with a video game” (p. 875). It is in these activities of content creation—rather than in moments of gameplay—that Behrenshausen locates the field’s core convictions about player agency. Behrenshausen believes that this active, productive player “figure functions as a placeholder for researchers’ uninterrogated epistemological assumptions and political commitments” (p. 877). The implication is that this research boom is a reaction to the field’s privileging of formal game structures in its analyses. Yet, it may also be the case that the active player-producer—and the ostensibly true agency of collective intervention—is also an attempt to alleviate deep anxieties concerning *passivity*, to assure positions of control in relation to digital media and modes of entertainment that increasingly saturate and shape our lived experiences. It may be that, as Johnson (2015) claims, instances of frustrated agency in video games incite “the feeling that we are losing control—not just over the games we play, but over other parts of our social and technologically mediated lives” (p. 608).

### VI. Challenges to the Passive—Active Binary

“There seems to be a debate,” write Mustola et al. (2018) “about whether playing digital games should be considered ‘active’ or ‘passive’ activity” (pp. 237-254). Reviewing the literature surrounding children’s digital play, the authors found that the passive—active binary corresponds to numerous antitheses, many of which have also emerged over the course of our study at hand. These include: “reception and production...consumption and production...mechanicalness and creativity...[and] lack of critical thinking and criticalness” (p. 240). Studies on passivity are far fewer in number—and they tend to be decidedly negative. Charles (2009), for instance, frets that the illusion of agency in video games lures players into interpretative passivity that disempowers them as citizens. Heckner (2013) theorizes a *productive passive player position*, but holds that the productivity of this position lies in the fact that it shows players the “problematic nature of passivity” (p. 185) and the “possibly dangerous political implications of a validation of passivity” (p. 193). In the horror genre, passivity and loss of control are the very sources of fear.

Activity and passivity “often seem to be used as value judgments... This is a commonly accepted valuation in Western societies” (Mustola et al., 2018, p. 250). Indeed, a few studies mentioned connections between agency and the Western “liberal humanist virtues of choice, free will, and success” (Chang,

2017, p. 231) alongside the views of passivity and submission “as major flaws in our neo-liberalist culture” (Heckner, 2013, p. 183). Muriel and Crawford (2018) scrutinize the ways that video games and rhetorics of agency propagate the forms of active subjecthood that neoliberalism demands. Yet, the enduring negative connotations of *passivity* or *lack of agency* offer little in the way of counteracting these discourses. Even those studies that dig into the ideologies engrained in agency rarely discuss the power dynamics embedded in discursive relationships between passivity and marginality. As mentioned earlier, ascriptions of activity and passivity assign hierarchical subject positions in hegemonic Western discourses. The dreads of passivity and objectification reproduce a white, able, heteronormative, masculine point-of-view, which can’t bear to imagine that which it has assigned to subjugated others.

Contrasting these discourses, there are many examples of scholarship that challenge the passivity assigned to marginalized groups. Assertions of active, oppositional agentic subject positions have long been part of strategies in feminist politics to defy women’s objectified status in Western cultures, including in feminist work on video games (e.g. Kennedy, 2006; Jennings, 2018). Applications of queer studies to video games have overhauled passivity, embracing its paradoxes and non-normative pleasures as part of projects to recategorize failure as an inherently queer form of play (Ruberg, 2017). Moreover, scholars have also recognized the latent ableism of discourses surrounding agency and control, which renders disability both inert and invisible. Boluk and LeMieux (2017), for example, critique the ableism of standardized game controllers and emphasize that alternative interfaces not only make video games more accessible, but can radically overhaul what it means to play.

Under the surface crust of the troubled passive-active binary is Western philosophy’s overriding treatment of nonhumans as passive to the point of utterly lacking agency. Johnson (2015), for instance, suggests that in the face of obstructed agency, players may feel that they are being automatized, objectified, and rendered nonhuman. And much of the field of game studies has replicated these thought patterns when theorizing agency, despite a vigorous assortment of scholarship on nonhuman agency both outside of and within game studies. For example, actor-network theory has made sporadic appearances in games research (Giddings, 2007; Jenson & de Castell, 2008; Harrell & Zhu, 2009; Muriel & Crawford, 2018). As we discussed earlier, numerous studies use cybernetic theories and cyborgian metaphors to theorize experiences of embodiment. Indeed, Giddings and Kennedy’s (2008) cybernetic framework postulates that “activity and passivity are not opposites in videogame play but fluctuations in the circuit” (p. 30) of human and nonhuman agencies. And yet another group of studies adapts Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) *assemblage* theory to video game agency (Taylor, 2009; Behrenshausen, 2012). Behrenshausen’s (2012) angle finds inspiration from Bennett (2010), who suspects that “the im-

age of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption” (p. ix).

But, although nonhuman passivity is a hallmark of Western thought, it is by no means a universal worldview. LaPensée’s (2017) work on *relationality* in Indigenous food and medicine games demonstrates Indigenous ways of knowing—as well as Indigenous ways of designing and playing video games—that resist dominant, all-encompassing theories of player control, illusions of control, or instrumentalizations of gameworlds. Drawing from Cajete’s (2000) definition of relationality, LaPensée explains that relationality refers to an Indigenous understanding that “all life is intricately connected from the biological to the philosophical to the spiritual to the actionable” (p. 191). LaPensée—who is Anishinaabe, Métis, and Irish—notes that in many video games, medicinal plants appear only as resources for player-characters’ unchecked and unconstrained consumption. Players often have no other ways of relating to plants such as replanting or tending to them. Yet, Anishinaabemowin has “no phrases that position plants simply as objects to be possessed” (p. 194). Thus, agency in some Indigenous-determined food and medicine games is about complex relations of caretaking between humans and plants, rather than players’ consumption. Furthermore, as Madsen (2017) emphasizes, LaPensée’s work contrasts views of agency as a matter of player autonomy, as it consistently focuses on relationships within community. LaPensée’s designs thus demonstrate potentials for video games to deconstruct agency as a solitary experience of individual player control, instead providing possibilities for intricate collective agencies among humans and nonhumans.

Further accounting for nonhuman agencies can therefore obstruct the passive—active binary and the disparaging discourses of passivity. Such approaches can emphatically orient game studies research towards issues of justice, enabling more comprehensive and nuanced identifications of the currents of power surging through video games, their designs, and their material existences. From earlier examples, Russworm (2017) and Tulloch, Hoad, and Young (2019) account for character agency to decenter the primacy of white, heteronormative subjectivities. Additionally, Marcotte (2018) considers the agentic potentialities of glitches in queering game design and player control. Altogether, these examples demonstrate the intricate distributions of the material agencies of video games: platform, hardware, interface, software, diegesis. Conceptualizing video games as power-laden socio-technical artifacts, they also equip the field to further examine the collective agencies that converge in the creation of video games and gaming platforms.

### CONCLUSION: PLURAL MODALITIES OF AGENCIES

Ultimately, this meta-synthesis bore plentiful evidence that the passive-active binary is not tenable for fully understanding agency in video games. Playing video games is simultaneously active and passive; it is both, but it is also

neither. Tulloch (2014) attempts to work through the paradox in which “the player is at the same time active agent and prisoner of the system, author of events, and slave to the game’s authority, creative contributor and mindless automaton” (p. 336). In their study of BDSM and gaming, Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán (2015) explain: “When the player engages in a game, she is, in some measure, a slave to the designer’s intentions. At the same time, she is mastering the game and its fictional elements; overcoming obstacles is an active, dominant process that also implies playing the role of the master” (p. 131). As Giddings and Kennedy (2008) state, play is not simply about mastering the machine, but being mastered by it. Consequently, “a new conceptual language is needed to attend to both the operations of nonhuman agency and the human pleasures of lack of agency, of being controlled, of being *acted upon*” (p. 30). And the literature on *BioShock* culminates into a collective warning about how imagined empowerment disciplines players into unreflexive obedience.

If we take seriously the notion that discourses about agency—including not only commercial rhetoric, but academic as well—shape player’s expectations of agency, then the cumulative import of many studies suggests treading cautiously in future trajectories. Across the varied discussions in game studies, the regular extolments of player agency—and even the lamentations of its illusions, of its inherent unattainability—dislodge (game)world events from complex, collective, historical contingencies. Idealizations of player agency, control, and activity abstract the potency of the single player-character into a hyper-individualistic actor whose choices can and should have resonating consequences ranging from the personal to the world-historical. These theories are especially troubling if the focus shifts from propagated neoliberal ideologies to consider affinities with the power-in-obedience of authoritarianism. When viewed through the lens of authoritarianism, the seemingly contradictory conditions in which players are at once masters of and mastered by the game take on new meaning. In this light, these experiences of agency as empowerment-through-obedience merit further deliberation.

Yet, we still have to sort through a question that has loomed over this meta-synthesis: is an *experience* sufficient for *agency*? Grodal (2003) proclaims that a player’s experience of making a difference is the only necessary condition for agency. But for other scholars—such as those concerned with illusions of agency—an experience alone is insufficient for true agency. Workarounds to this conundrum begin to emerge by putting many of these disparate studies into conversation with one another: agency in video games manifests as *plural modalities*, rather than scattered along a spectrum of more-or-less or true-or-illusory. For much of the history of agency research in video games, a modified agency/structure model appears to have been a tacit basis, according to which video games designs are structures that constrain and afford player action and choice. Instead, it’s possible to reposition players within the massive, tangling,

moving configurations of human and nonhuman agencies that compose instances of gameplay. Assemblage theories (Taylor, 2009; Behrenshausen, 2012) and cybernetic methods (Giddings & Kennedy, 2008; Keogh, 2018) offer possible starting points, as their malleability can adapt to the variability of players, to the contingent actions of players within and against and alongside co-constitutive arrays of agentic nonhuman actions and influences. Who is playing, how they're playing, and how they're situated in relation to game and culture all contribute to molding the forms of agency that emerge in moments of gameplay. We can thus read the "organization of capacities for action that a specific arrangement of elements might afford" (Behrenshausen, 2012, p. 883) as specific articulations of agentic modalities.

In turn, these modalities of agency give rise to different experiences, as "the player's participation helps shape the meaning made of the experience" (Voorhees, 2014, para. 5). Weaving together players' activities with their interpretive agencies (Voorhees, 2014; Stang, 2019), and situating them all within the entanglement of video games' nonhuman agentic exertions and the agencies surrounding the conditions of game design, we find that gameplay is generative of experiences that are not reducible to control, choice, freedom, or autonomy. Modalities of agency include the agencies of caretaking and communal responsibility (LaPensée, 2017); the agencies of subversive feminine performativity (Jennings, 2018); and the self-destructive, unsanctioned agencies of queer failure (Ruberg, 2017). They are also collective, multiple agencies that defy the isolating, hyper-individualist tendencies implied in the intentional making of choices and the eager witness of their consequences.

Across this meta-synthesis, we have encountered a mottled assortment of approaches to agency in video games. But, we have also dug up some astonishing conformities across these works. We've discovered some research gaps and some possible future directions. As studies on agency continue to grow, we can keep our theories open to plural modalities of agency. And in this way, we can ensure an ever-expanding diversity of gaming agencies that critically frame video games as politico-socio-technical artifacts, that bear in mind multitudes of players and designers, and that are firmly oriented towards justice.



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