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INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON VIDEO GAME AGENCY

Edited by Ivan Girina & Berenike Jung

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HQ: Via Vittorio Veneto 33
89123 Reggio Calabria, IT
Offices: 64 Colley House
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CONTACT
editors@gamejournal.it
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JOURNAL ESSAYS

IVAN GIRINA
Brunel University, London
ivan.girina@brunel.ac.uk

& BERENIKE JUNG
King's College London
berenike.jung@kcl.ac.uk

"Would You Kindly?"

The Interdisciplinary Trajectories of Video Game Agency

Figure 1 – Jack's revelatory flashback during his final confrontation with Rapture's tyrant Andrew Ryan.

With its 8th issue, *G|A|M|E* proposes a re-examination of the concept of agency in video games. Departing from its notion as an aesthetic pleasure afforded *by* video games *to* players, our goal with this issue is to investigate its many meanings in order to both activate its political potential while also questioning the emancipatory rhetoric commonly attached to it. We set to achieve this goal with a call aimed to explore agency as an *interdisciplinary* concept, not only due to the nature of video games as "inherently interdisciplinary objects" (Mäyrä, 2009, p. 316) which is reflected by the methodological complexity of video game analysis (Aarseth, 2003), but most importantly in light of the transdisciplinary history of agency. Indeed, the importance of agency as a concept in game studies emerges through the aesthetic and political relationship connecting these artefacts to both individual and social bodies in the performance

of "actions." Alexander Galloway proposes the Deleuzian term "action-image" (2006, p. 3) in order to foreground video games' focus on "doing" and their prompting to act. Agency in this sense is understood through its etymological root, as the "the process of acting as an agent." Similarly, Markku Eskelinen and Ragnhild Tronstand's (2003) idea of "configurative performance" addresses the centrality of acting – not just cognitively but also through our bodies – in video games. Reflecting on the embodied dimension of video game actions, Graeme Kirkpatrick (2009) places the controller at the centre of the gaming apparatus as the focal point in the cycles of tension and release that characterise gameplay. Beyond the rhetoric of interactivity, the dimension of doing is in fact central in video games not just in terms of manipulating the digital artefact, but also with regards to the performance of the users who act *in* and *over* the game. On the other side of such etymological reading, "agency" can also indicate acting by proxy through another subject. Among other meanings, the OED defines agency as "the process of acting as an agent […]; the position, role, or function of an agent, deputy, or representative; an instance of this." In this sense, agency indicates the relinquishing of one's capacity to act and its transfer to someone or something else, shedding a veil of ambiguity on the affirmative power of this category.[1]

In the moments leading to the showdown between *Bioshock*'s (2K Games, 2007) protagonist Jack and Rapture's visionary despot, Andrew Ryan, upon reaching an abandoned office we (the players) are presented with a bright red mural painted with blood all over a wall: "Would you kindly?" On the desk, a set of tapes contain the recordings of Dr. Suchong's "Mind Control" experiments, in which a woman is coerced into killing a puppy. Following hours of seemingly necessary violence perpetrated against those opposing Jack's (and our) mission to hijack Rapture's despotic establishment, this episode still shocks for its gratuitousness, emphasised by the subject's helpless attempt to resist coercion. The woman finally gives in as the doctor prompts one final time: "Break that puppy's neck, would you kindly?" The episode unveils the curtain of rhetorical courtesy behind this expression, which leaves the receiving end of the communication with no choice but to oblige its request. In his final address to Jack (and to us) Andrew Ryan questions the nature of free will and the meaning of action in society: "In the end what separates a man from a slave? Money? Power? No. A man chooses, a slave obeys." Looking through the virtual camera, Ryan's speech shatters the illusion of control that we experienced up until this moment. As a cutscene takes over, Ryan commands Jack to kill him, casting the abject request one final time: "Would you kindly?" Looking through Jack's eyes but unable to move, we are left jarred by lack of interaction at such a crucial time, as *agency* is doubly denied to us: on a narrative level, we feel excluded from crucial information informing our choices and their consequences – as we find out that Jack's every action has been planted by

1. Cf. "agency, n.". OED Online. November 2019. Oxford University Press. https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/3851?redirectedFrom=agency (accessed November 19, 2020).

the Rapture's rebellion leader Atlas, later found to be Ryan's political opponent Frank Fontaine. On a ludic level we are left unable to act at a crucial moment in the game – as the cutscene prevents us from interacting – betraying the expectations embedded within the first-person interface. By stripping us of the affordances established earlier in the game, this sequence unveils the designed constraints of its ludic structure leaving players to wonder: who is in control? In this sense, *Bioshock* final moments offer a poignant critique of video game interactivity and its relationship with agency (Aldred and Greenspan, 2011; Wysocki and Schandler, 2013; Jackson, 2014; Schubert, 2015; Stang, 2019).

THE PLEASURES OF AGENCY

More than twenty years ago, in the 1996 seminal volume *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray defined agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (2016, p. 123). Today, agency is still prominently present in scholarly debates on video game ontology – emerging from video games' textual configuration through the multiplicity of paths and levels of interaction provided to the user – and in video game aesthetics – as the pleasurable experience control derived from taking meaningful decisions within virtual environments. In the words of Matt Margini (2017), writing on the pages of *The New Yorker* for the 20th anniversary since the publication of *Hamlet*, Murray's work "didn't sit entirely comfortably with any crowd – but, then, neither did Murray, a lover of postmodern technology who hates postmodern theory, a digital-media scholar with the reference points of an old-fashioned literary critic, a literary critic who writes in the future tense." Murray's book defined digital media aesthetic much beyond the scope of agency, establishing a vocabulary that to this day is used to describe the *procedural* character of digital artefacts and their *immersive* sensorial qualities. In Murray's proposition, agency casts itself as an alternative to the conceptual nebulosity of the term "interactivity" (p. 124) and to broad ideas of "participation" (p. 125). Agency exceeds the execution of actions required or prompted by interactive systems, and instead implies taking action within the virtual environment and seeing the effect of those actions unfolding according to one's intentions. In the same year of *Hamlet*'s publication, Espen Aarseth's *Cybertexts* (1997) similarly criticised the rhetorical and ideological character of the term "interactive" (p. 48), proposing instead the category of the "ergodic" to describe both the multiplicity of paths afforded by these texts as well as the non-trivial effort required to the user in order to traverse them (*ergon*: "work"; and *hodos*: "path"). Indeed, Murray outlines two modes of experiencing agency in virtual environments: *navigational* and *constructivist*. Building a taxonomy of agential experiences, Murray's agency is firstly found in the pleasure of spatial navigation and "orienteering" oneself, moving through "digital environments" and "virtual landscapes", expanding on the experience previously

afforded by the hypertexts of the World Wide Web (2016, p. 125). In this sense, the agential pleasure anticipates debates around the spatial quality of video games as texts that not only afford the possibility of virtually exploring space, but that also create such spaces, even impossible ones which defy the physical boundaries of the real world (Wolf, 1997; Nitsche, 2008). The pleasure of traversing and asserting one's agency over the digital environment has led scholars to read these forms of orientation through the lens of postcolonial studies (Lemmes, 2003; Langer, 2008), defining spatial mastering within practices of "mapping" (as a form of knowledge-based mastering of space) and "touring" (as the performance of traversing space) (Lammes, 2008). The agential pleasure of orientation is, in this sense, always inscribed within tales of progression by the discovery and ordering of space, which in return enables the experience of control. Indeed, Alexander Galloway identifies videogames as "allegories of control," as they "don't attempt to hide informatic control, they flaunt it" (2006, p. 90). Control is both thematised – in tropes and narratives, as in the above example from *Bioshock*, but also in other games such as *The Stanley Parable*'s Mind Control Facility (Galactic Caffé, 2011) – and integral part of video game formal structures – through mechanics and interfaces, as in the example of *Until Dawn*'s Butterfly Effect game mechanic (Supermassive Games, 2015). More recently authors criticised the teleological trajectory of orientation, questioning its ideological assumption and turning instead towards non-normative ways of experiencing space, for example by juxtaposing it with the critical value of being *dis*-orientated and of *re*-orienting oneself in order to account for subjective affect in gaming (Anable, 2018, p. xix). This is part of a larger move towards destabilising the idea of "mastery" attached to digital discourses, one that is at the same time invested in undoing the existential assertiveness present in the etymology of the vocabulary of video game control: "agency", from the Latin *agens*, meaning "effective, powerful"; as "interactive", from the Latin *inter*, "among, between", and *activus*, "to drive, draw out or forth, move". For Murray, the pleasure of spatial exploration is mirrored by that of narrative choices and the two are connected through the metaphors of the *maze* and *rhizome*. These spatial forms represent the organisation of the users' activity within the virtual environment, which consequently structures the availability of paths. For Murray, such availability – from the one predetermined paths of the maze (in linear games), to the interconnected nodes of the rhizome (in open ended simulations) – maps the relationship between the intentionality of the player and the outcomes available at each interaction: for example, no matter which path we take through a *Bioshock* level, there is only one entrance and one exit, mirroring the constrained narrative that frames our actions in the game which always lead to Ryan's death. The constrained nature of agency has been further explored by scholars in relation to design practices, which contribute to the deconstruction of the ideological freedom attached to agency. For instance, Michael Mateas (2001) merges Murray's idea of agency

with Brenda Laurel's Aristotelian model of interface design, framing agency as resulting from the negotiation between *formal* and *material* constraints. In Laurel's model, the computer's most crucial property is its "capacity to *represent actions in which humans could participate*." (1993, p. 1) By placing "action" at the forefront of the computer experience, Laurel envisions computer users as agents: "An agent is one who initiates and performs actions" (p. 47). The experience of agency is found in the balance of the *material* and *dramatic causes* that organise the relationship between the elements constituting a digital event (Action, Character, Thought, Language, Pattern, Enactment). While the material causes describe the limited nature of possibilities made available by the system (placing constraints and affordances over the actions), the dramatic ones motivate the user to take certain types of actions within the virtual environments, making those actions more or less desirable: "Just as the material constraints can be considered as affording actions from the level of spectacle through thought, the formal constraints afford motivation from the level of plot. […] Players will experience agency when there is a balance between the material and formal constraints" (p. 145). Central to the design of agency is the relation between players and the computational model, which is neither predicated on the rhetoric of "free will" (the computational model is finite and interaction is limited by clear rules) nor on that of "realist" representation (if not matched by coherently accurate interaction models). Agency is instead dependent on a model of "dramatic probabilities" which must account for players' expectations and gaming literacy. According to such design perspectives, agency is: "a phenomenon, involving both the game and the player, that occurs when the actions players desire are among those they can take *as supported by an underlying computational model*" (Wardrip-Fruin et al., 2009, p. 7 emphasis in the original). In this sense, the constraints imposed by video game materiality are not symptomatic of the limits imposed over players' agency or its illusory quality, rather they enable it. In fact, in the same way that play is not extinguished but instead thrives on the rules of a game, agency is experienced not despite material and dramatic constraints, but as a result of them. This conceptualisation of agency as an experience afforded to the user by the careful designing of the game-system, runs parallel to the questioning of other fundamental categories associated with rhetoric of self-determination in virtual environments such as that of interactivity. For example, Dominic Arsenault and Bernard Perron (2008) propose the term "intra(re)activity" in order to destabilise the centrality of the gamer in theories of gameplay: "The entire game system and the events have been programmed and are fixed, and the designer has tried to predict the gamer's reactions to these events and develop the game (in part through artificial intelligence programming) to react in turn to some of the gamer's reactions" (p. 120). We will see later how the ideology of the "active" that seem to inhabit and drive both "interactivity" and

"agency" has been recently questioned through even more radical propositions such as that of "inter-passivitiy" (Wilson, 2003).

While Murray's most revisited work casts agency as an aesthetic effect produced by the text, later in the same chapter the author moves away from such textual-centric approaches, turning to a constructivist framework. Here Murray highlights the centrality of users in this process – beyond the interaction within computational models – as they take action over the system and manipulate it. Looking at how students used a Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) interface to organise social activities other than gaming – establishing a purpose different from the software's original one – Murray highlights the medium's "ability to build things that display autonomous behaviour" (2016, p. 140). While in appearance still focusing on the properties of the digital artifact, this passage marks a crucial shift from the agency *afforded* by the text to the agency *claimed* by the user's idiosyncratic manipulation with the artefact and its purpose. The use of the adjective "constructivist" in this context reflects the wider popularisation of constructivist theory since the 1980s across the fields of Learning Psychology, Pedagogy and more recently Education Studies. More importantly, in Game Studies such a move marks the passage from a game-centric approach (what the video games make us do) to one focused on gameplay (what can we do with video games). In fact, the concept of agency has been over the years inscribed in larger discourses of procedurality which frame simulations and computational models at the centre of gaming. Murray herself underlines *procedurality* as one of the main qualities of new digital artefacts. More recently, Ian Bogost's (2007) popular conceptualisation of *procedural rhetoric* complements Murray's optimistic take, pointing at the ways in which rule-based systems advance a rhetorical proposition by shaping the users' behaviour into performing intended procedures. In this sense, procedurality frames agency within a semiotic cage in which meaning is pre-arranged and can only be executed by the user via such procedures. Against these deterministic readings, scholars such as Miguel Sicart (2011) draw attention to the performative nature of games and the subversive nature of play. In particular, theories of play highlight players' critical engagement with rules in a balance between submission and assertion, as they do not only play *by* the rules, but also always play *with* them, challenging their given constraints. As in Murray's example of constructivist agency in MUDs spaces, players do not always conform to the objectives inscribed in games' formal structures and instead find agency in playfully taking over the rules. In one of the most interesting recent interventions in play theory, Sicart (2014, p. 11) discusses the *appropriative* quality of play that "takes over the context in which it exists and cannot be totally predetermined by such context." For Sicart, the chaotic nature of play disrupts established semiotic structures and therefore requires rethinking the process of signification: "the idea of meaning needs to be abandoned in favor of collaborative processes of engagement and interac-

tion among all agents in the network of play. Nobody dictates meaning, order, importance, or action; all agents, designers and players, negotiate play" (2014, p. 90). If agency is about perceiving the effects of actions in a context, play has the potential to disrupt agencies implicit in the design of games, making way for new and different ones. One example of such subversive play is found in the emergence of in-game photography (Poremba, 2017). Reflecting on such subversive uses, author Cindy Poremba (2003) links the repression of authorial discourses in game studies to the foregrounding of gamers' agency and the figure of the "player author." The emphasis on players' intentionality, performativity and their capacity to manipulate and act in the virtual environment erode video game authorship across all discursive levels. While much of in-game photography reflects mainstream video game discourses, echoing the tropes and aesthetic of advertisement in the industry, works such as Alan Butler's in-game photography project *Down and Out in Los Santos* display the critical potential intrinsic in practices of subversive play. Turning the "shooting" mechanic in *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar, 2013) on itself, Butler's digital photographs, portraying the homeless Non-Playing Characters (NPCs) populating the game, hijack its neoliberal logic of accumulation by foregrounding the systemic poverty reproduced by the computational model (Girina, 2019b). Agency is here understood not as the perceived impact of the players over the virtual world, but rather as the actual capacity to affect the game from within (circumventing its rules and goals) and from without (manipulating its material structure, its code or design). Drawing from Bernard Suit's seminal volume *The Grasshopper*, Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux (2017, p. 8) provide an acute analysis of the contentious relationship between video games and play:

> In a world of asshoppers and grants where winter is a constant reality, the fantasy of summer – of games and play – serves as a ubiquitous, cultural logic that guides both the consumption and production of consumer electronics and digital entertainment like videogames. Whether or not Suits' utopian vision can ever be realized, videogames operate as the ideological avatar of play: a widely held, naturalized system of beliefs that conflates the fantasy of escapism with the commodity form and encloses play within the magic circle of neoliberal capital.

If Suits (1978) argues that games are "utopias" in which play emerges as players freely negotiate and subscribe arbitrary rules and obstacles, video games are dystopias in which play is inhibited by the imposition of non-negotiable constraints such as the game algorithms and mechanics. Agency becomes a surrogate for play, as players' freedom to negotiate and subscribe the game's rule is replaced by the myth of choice and by the abundance of paths available to players. The progressive foregrounding of agency discourses in relation to video games ideologically hides their non-negotiable algorithmic nature. In this sense, the foregrounding of discourses on agency functions ideologically to hide the non-

negotiable algorithmic nature of mechanics in video games as opposed to the social process of negotiating rules in traditional ones. In the words of Boluk and LeMieux, "Games have been replaced by video games and play has been replaced by fun" (2017, p. 8). Video games then are not games, but rather digital artefacts used by players to make and perform their own *meta-games* (Boluk and LeMieux, 2017, p. 9), as exemplified in speedrun video performances in which players showcase their prowess by "beating" the game according to self-imposed rules. In this battle of extreme ludic realities, video games seem to offer a deceptive sense of agency to the players as surrogate for play and as a discursive marker of "fun". On the other hand, a different type of agency can be found in meta-gaming practices such as in-game photography and speed-running, which emerge through the subversive playful appropriations.

Video game agency then seems to reside on a rhetorical spectrum that stretches between two poles: on the one hand, the issue of agency has often been framed as one of free will and self-determination, an argument often wielded by techno-enthusiasts such as Murray; on the other hand, the claim for agency has been criticised as a deception, a mechanism created to fashion the illusion of freedom of choice in order to hide the material constraints of the simulation, in the dramatic model of Mateas and Wardrip-Fruin's critique of computational models. In the following, we will sketch the historical genealogy of agency and its recent renaissance under a post-digital condition (Cramer, 2013), and highlight how some of the salient contributions from other academic fields – such as social sciences, philosophy and media studies – can productively inform and renew our understanding of the politics of gaming and play.

AGENCY ACROSS FIELDS

The ideological construction of agency as surrogate for freedom can be traced across various academic fields. In one of the most exhaustive interdisciplinary surveys on agency, Susanne Eichner (2014) denounces the trapping of this category within disciplinary boundaries and brings forth its common threads. Fields such as Social Sciences and Psychology maintain a fundamental distinction between the agency of human actors and those of non-human actors and objects; others, such as Game Studies, Communication, as well as certain branches of Film and Media Studies focus on the textual and discursive construction of agency and its illusory quality; finally, recent posthumanist approaches, such as Science, Technology & Society Studies (STS) and New Materialism, offer a complete ontological reconfiguration, and propose an understanding of agency as relational. More broadly, debates on agency can be located on five different axes:

1. the opposition between *intentionality* (the individual's perception of the action in relation to the intention) and *causality* (the effect of the actions on a context);

2. the negotiation between *personal agency* (the individual's capacity to act) and *collective agency* (a social body's potential to act);
3. the distinction between *primary agency* (of the individual) and *secondary agency* (possessed by or attributed to objects);
4. the ideological notion of media as *active* or *passive,* therefore offering more or less agency to its users;
5. the emergence of a different ontology of agency beyond the polarity of *human* vs *nonhuman agency.*

INTENTIONALITY AND CAUSALITY

The roots of agency in the individual's capacity for action and its effects on the context exceed the virtual boundaries traced by Murray in her work on cyberdramas, and reach back to philosophy and social science. For Eichner, the question of agency can be traced back to debates on "action theory" in modern philosophy. For example, Max Weber's social theory organises action around four categorisations: *instrumental* (determined by a contextual goal), *value-oriented* (motivated by beliefs such as religion and politics), *affective* (engendered by an emotional response), and *traditional* (as a consequence of habits and customs) (in Eichner, 2014, p. 19). Such categorisations focus on the issue of intentionality, exemplified in the division between *rational* social actions which are intentionally sought out by the actor, and *irrational* actions. The latter are, in fact, considered responsive behaviours, not motivated by the intention of the agents and instead dictated by the context. Beyond the mechanics of choice, agency has been thematised in video games particularly with regards to issues of intentionality and rationality. In the Sci-fi epic trilogy of *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2017-2013), the protagonist, Commander Shepard, attempts to stop the invasion of the Reapers, a synthetic life form that feeds off other galactic species using them as biofuel. Beyond the choice mechanics and moral system that have been widely discussed in relation to their agential qualities (Joyce 2016; Stang, 2019), *Mass Effect* thematizes the tension between the individual agency of Shepard and the hive-logic of the Reapers, which literalizes the metaphor of collective agency. Agency in *Mass Effect* is ultimately contested in the opposition between the needs of the Reapers – whose rational and instrumental thinking addresses the issue of sustainable life in the universe as an economic problem, one that can be resource-managed through endless cycles of culling and genocides – and the irrational and reactive will of Shepard (metonymically standing for all humanity) – who acts according to a moral compass, a personal worldview to preserve all life regardless of the consequence. According to these perspectives, agency is characterised by intentional actions, meaning those rational behaviours that are intended by the individual, who also can predict their outcome. Eichner notices how "the Kantian conception of free will versus necessity served as a fundamental basis for normative approaches of agency as employed by Talcott Parsons" (2014, p. 23). Particularly Parsons' influence on "modern

action theory" is predicated on the intentionality as distinct from free will, as the intention of the actor is not only motivated by the individual's values, but also by contextual goals as well as being negotiated in relation to the social system. Eichner (2014, p. 32) calls these *praxeological approaches*, meaning those approaches that frame actions as resulting from purposeful human behaviours. These are based on four principles: the self-reflexivity of actions; their social and contextual meaning; their performative and embodied nature; the exclusion of intentionality as a necessary qualifier. The designed constraints found in video games then are not an impediment to agency, but a manifestation of the context and social systems in which agency is situated (that of the industrialization and commodification of play, as argued by Boluk and Le Mieux). Furthermore, the issue of intentionality is contentious as the meaning of the action and its impact can not always be planned in advance, and yet those actions can have meaningful consequences for the actor: "assuming subjects to be always "keeping track" of their actions proves to be illusionary" (Eichner, 2014, p. 23).

PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE AGENCY

Theoretical frameworks – ranging from Parsons' relationship between the *individual action* and *social systems*, to Bourdieu's idea of *habitus* which indicates the socially constructed and performative nature of action – question the relevance of individual intentionality in light of the negotiation of agencies with larger social systems. Habitus describes how social practices are always constructed, mediated by socially inscribed behaviours, for which the "habitus adjusts practice to structure, ensuring the practical (re)production of structure" (Eichner, 2014, p. 26). In this sense, the concept of habitus problematizes the assumption that any action can ever be ascribed entirely to the individual and isolated from its social context. The issue of intentionality is further addressed in psychological approaches that foreground instead the centrality of awareness and *self-efficacy*. Bandura (in Eichner, 2014, p. 47) distinguishes between four levels of awareness: intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness. Central to agency is the notion of the "planning agents" (Bratman in Eichner, 2014, p. 46), characterised not by the ability to anticipate the outcome of each action, but rather by the capacity of evaluating the impact of each action and adjusting behaviours accordingly. Following the work of Bandura, Diane Carr et al. (2004) distinguish between three different types of video game agency. *Individual/personal agency* is that of the player who takes action over the video game text by renegotiating its structure, for example in speedrunning practices; *proxy agency* is delegated by the player to another whenever they resort to the use of external help of walkthroughs, cheat-codes or simply the support of other players. Collective agency results from the action taken by multiple players manipulating, expanding or reconfiguring a video game text, as for example in fandom and modding communities. As noted by Eichner, the emphasis on self-reflexivity frees agential debates from the loaded notion of "free will"

– which is at odds with previous sociological approaches emphasising social and contextual constraints – shifting the focus towards self-reflection. Such a shift turns the discourse on agency from an ontological to a phenomenological perspective, foregrounding the *perception* of ourselves as agents, and the *attribution* of agency to other subjects. For Bandura, information technology does not only represent and supply our desire for "control" but it also shapes it, influencing our desire for agency: "The accelerated pace of informational, social and technological evolution has placed a premium on people's capabilities to exert a strong hand in their own development and functioning throughout the life course" (2009, p. 16). Video games in this sense do not simply sublimate our need for control (to feel effective in the world) and instead foster it, generating an expectation of control over the world around us. While most games seek complimenting and satisfying such desires for control by manufacturing the experience of agency for the user, others such as *Bioshock* purposefully frustrate it, pointing at its virtual, and thus ephemeral, nature. For example, the action-stealth game *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (Konami, 2015), which manipulates the player into believing the false identity of its protagonist, Venomous Snake. Only by repeating the missions a second time, are we given access to a sequence which reveals our player-character to be an outlier and a pawn of the real Snake, Big Boss, who uses our player-character (and us with him) as a decoy in his battles against government agencies and private armies. The sense of heroism and exceptionalism associated with the military tale of vengeance until that moment is suddenly destabilised by the notion that our character is just a replica of an elusive original, creating a meeting between the narrative world of *Metal Gear* and the materiality of the video game commodity. Indeed, the game thematizes control and its loss in its title, through the figure of the "phantom pain" which can't be healed as it resides in a missing limb – the player is constantly reminded of it by Snake's prosthetic arm – and through the larger trope of torture – present both in cutscenes and in the grotesque interrogation mechanics – which does not have real narrative function, providing only non-essential information, making apparent its exercise in power and control (Girina, 2019a). Video games then are not only objects that channel and enable our agency, but most importantly they negotiate with us the meaning of agency, shaping our expectations with regards to self-efficacy and the capacity to affect and influence the world around us.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY AGENCY

Furthermore, non-human entities, such as objects, machines or networks, may be granted *perceived* or *attributed* agency, under certain conditions. For example, Alfred Gell's (1998) idea of *secondary agency* points to the agency attributed to the artwork and art objects as emanation of the *primary* agency of the artist. Rehearsing ideas of intentionality, for Gell the social agent is always human, as "Actions cannot really be conceptualised in other than social terms" (1998, p.

17). Distinguishing that which "happens" from that who "acts", Gell recuperates discourses of intentionality, theorising agency as a transferable property from beings to objects that can only carry it. Nevertheless, such a framework begins to highlight the frail and arbitrary disqualification of objects as agents. Similarly, game designers and scholars discuss games' capacity of providing the illusion of agency, by creating a rule-system which is an emanation of the designer's intention (McCallum-Stewart and Parsler, 2007). Here, theory turns towards a less specialist, and more popular, meaning of the word "agency", that of a mediator for action, a proxy that is invested with the capacity to act by someone or something else. Such an understanding of agency as attributed to machinic programmes is not novel. For example, in her work on the dramatisation of computer interfaces, Laurel reminds us that in "social and legal terms, an agent is one who is empowered to act on behalf of another" (1993, p. 61). While maintaining a distinction between beings and objects, Gell's approach is important for the theorisation of the relational quality of agency articulated across two dimensions: on the one hand, to exert agency as an agent; on the other hand, its opposite, to be subjected to the agency of others as a "patient" (p. 21). While such distinction allows agency to enter the realm of relationality, steering away from ontological qualifications and moving towards an attribution model that reconciles sociological and psychological positions, it also clearly identifies this category as a rhetorical site of power. Such rhetoric of agency power has been prominently in media debates, notably in the dichotomic construction of spectatorship as either active or passive depending on the medium. In fact, discourses of activity/passivity are often evoked in relation to video games, where agency emerges as a distinct aesthetic category to highlight the medium specific pleasure of taking action in an environment, as opposed to its lack that distinguishes ideas of passive reception and low critical engagement. Such rhetoric of activity is often constructed in popular discourse against the passivity associated with other media forms, such as film and literature. Beyond the sheer cognitive work involved in these processes, such discourses generally ignore also the inter/trans- and meta-textual ways in which readers and spectators engage with their objects, evident for example in fandom practices that – not unlike Murray's MUD example and in Poremba's modding culture – allow the manipulation and subversion of texts beyond their intended purposes. Such forms of engagement have been central in post-structuralist reception theories as well as in the study of feminist and queer spectatorship. Reflecting on the multiplicity of media engagement and attempting to part ways with rhetorical discourses of media activity/passivity, Eichner ultimately theorises agency as "a special form of media involvement, [which] is potentially present in all media reception" (p. 13). Focusing on the *experience* of agency in the process of media reception and appropriation, the author conceptualises agency as a particular mode of involvement induced by specific textual strategies.

ACTIVITY AND PASSIVITY

In the 1980s, video games marketing rhetoric exploited the "interactivity" discourse associated with computer entertainment, to promote its hybridization with television, a medium that had repeatedly been constructed as "passive". Public discourses around television would criticise its visual quality as deficient and its modes of engagement as intellectually stultifying and inviting a distracted mode of attention (cf. Adorno, 1976; Postman, 1987). Such disparaging judgments were closely intertwined with gendered and classist ideas of "quality" and a condescending attitude towards popular culture more generally. In the 1970s, the emerging field of television studies was still strongly influenced by social sciences (Williams, 1974; Newcomb, 1974), but beginning in the 1980s, television scholars developed a more medium-specific methodology and contested claims regarding the alleged passive reception of the medium. Especially in comparison to cinema, the televisual image offers not only the possibility of concentrated engagement, but also formats and moments of highly participatory quality, and various formats with heightened audience interaction, such as game and quiz shows. Television scholars highlighted the viewers' experience (Ang, 1985; Newcomb/Hirsch, 1983; Kaplan, 1983), deconstructed the link between gender, class and quality (Brunsdon, 1990), and emphasised the role of active audiences (e.g. Fiske, 1987; Jenkins, 1992). In the 1980s, video games became an increasingly mainstream form of interactive entertainment technology, and television was of crucial importance to this popularisation. The explosion of another wave of home consoles in the 1990s, with products such as Sony Playstation and Sega Saturn, brought about the promise of a new form of entertainment for the masses, one that reached outside the skilled subcultures of hackers and bedroom developers, and outgrew the stereotypes that associated video games with child's play. Products such as Mattel Intellivision offered marketing campaigns capitalising on the myth of the "idiot box" with slogans such as "this is intelligent television" (Sheila MacMurphy, p. 2009). The familiar object brought the possibility to enter virtual worlds and engage with interactive artifacts to the households of entirely new demographics. Thus, video games in the 1990s created a giddying sense of possibility through phantasies of spatial transgression, novel and immersive "activity" that could feel empowering. Although the notion of media as passive or active has been overhauled in scholarship, the parallels between video game marketing in the 1990s and today, when again agency is proclaimed as a manifestation of free will, seem to be implicitly built on this premise.

HUMAN AND NONHUMAN AGENCY

Lastly, perspectives that may be loosely grouped under the umbrella term New Materialism (NM) explore the agency of nonhuman actors not as an attributed characteristic but on its own terms (Coole & Frost, 2010). NM shares aspects with Science, Technology & Society Studies (cf. Lemke, 2017) and Object

Oriented Ontologies, and stretches across political and cultural theory, queer theory, philosophy, cultural theory, biopolitics, critical race theory, media studies, geography, archaeology and literature. Working within a posthumanist framework, all of these different approaches embrace the vitality of matter, object to the anthropocentric privileging of humans over the nonhuman world and to viewing things only from the perspective of human use, which extends to humanist notions of agency. Already in 1988, Donna Haraway had proposed imagining the world as witty coding trickster, in order to make "room for surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production; we are not in charge of the world" (Haraway, 1988, p. 594). Rather than perceiving the world as "the raw material of culture", as things to be resourced, this move required a re-thinking of knowledge: to imagine the object looking back, with its own agency. Materialist feminism has indeed featured strongly in NM (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2010; Braidotti, 2013; Grosz, 2004; Alaimo & Hekman 2008), expanding a strictly constructivist framework to consider how material bodies, spaces, and conditions contribute to the formation of subjectivity. In distinction from techno-utopian and transhumanist discourses — which welcome the sublimation of the human through technology — NM advances a "critical posthumanism", arguing against a disembodied view of information (the possibility of separating information from its carrier). Agency is reframed as emerging from entanglements and constellations between matter, rather than objects with fixed qualities, while object-oriented approaches *do* assume the existence of objects as entities that cannot be reduced to their relations (Bogost, 2012; cf. Bogost, 2010), although they also topple humanity from its position at the summit of a hierarchically conceived world. Two perspectives derived from this "material turn," which have been particularly influential in recent years, are sketched in the following as they offer a significant conceptual redefinition of the term and idea of agency: Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) and Karen Barad's theory of agential realism.

Originally developed in the social sciences by Michele Callon, Bruno Latour, John Law and others, ANT has become a staple in media studies (e.g. Couldry, 2008; Seier, 2017; Teurlings, 2013). In ANT, agency — the capacity to act — precedes the identification of particular "actants", regardless of whether these are human or non-human. ANT positions a "radical symmetry" between such actants, rather than a priori distinguishing between humans and objects, or other binary divides, such as nature/culture, human/technology. Methodologically de-essentialist, ANT objects to considering technical artifacts, for instance, as isolatable elements of culture and society. Agency emerges from the processes and actions of transformation and reconfiguration. Rather than an intrinsic quality, agency is an effect of these relations. Latour's examples include keychains, revolving doors and elevators, as well as the potent effects and repercussions on a systemic scale of a computer crash or the explosion of a mine. These ontologically heterogeneous "actants" may form a more or less

impermanent formation or "network" from which "networked intentionality" emerges (Latour, 1993, p. 261). Agency is thus defined as neither requiring a consciousness nor as necessarily intentional. Applied to game studies, ANT interferes in productive ways in the neoliberal ideas of self-determination that inform much gamer language. For instance, Daniel Muriel and Gary Crawford interrogate how a notion of agency entangled with the discourse on freedom, responsibility and control expands beyond individual video game texts. They suggest that agency in games is the "multiple, distributed, and dislocated production of differences and transformations" (Muriel & Crawford, 2020, p. 140), while intentionality and purpose reside in dispositifs, apparatuses, and institutions (rather than objects or humans). The authors link this rhetoric of individualised stories of success and failure to neoliberal ideology and its techno-utopian solutionism.

Among the most influential proponents of NM, Karen Barad, a theoretical physicist, builds on quantum mechanics from a critical feminist posthumanist perspective. Through a "diffractive reading" of scholars ranging across seemingly different approaches and fields, such as Niels Bohr, Michele Foucault and Judith Butler, Barad confronts and combines feminist analyses of power with a notion of materiality from the natural sciences. The figure of "diffraction" — an epistemological metaphor originally from Donna Haraway — is used as both ontology and methodology: different concepts and ideas entangle and are read through and with one another. At the centre of Barad's work is the notion of *agential realism* — "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" (Barad, 2007, p. 33) — which offers an epistemological and ontological reworking of the notion of agency. Key to agential realism is what Barad calls "intra-active becoming" (Barad, 2007, p. 151). Such a becoming understands the fundamental units of being not as words and things or subjects and objects — turning away from the linguistic-semiotic-interpretive turn in critical theory — but as dynamic phenomena produced through entangled and shifting forms of agency inherent in all materiality. For Barad, the relation between things is constituted by her neologism "intra-action": there is no defined or self-contained entity that exists "behind" phenomena. Agency is not an attribute of humans, subjects or objects but emerges through intra-active dynamics and processes. Similar to Latour's concern for *Gaia*, Barad also seeks to link this ontological and epistemological approach to an ethics, a response-ability: "Practices of knowing and being are not isolable; they are mutually implicated. We don't obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world" (Barad, 2007, p. 185). In Game Studies, Barad's approach may allow for approaches beyond a focus on game texts, content, or representation without giving up on an ethical or political intervention. For example, Alison Harvey (2011, p. 178) suggests that Barad's agential realism offers a conceptual lens to account for the mutually constituted character, the entanglement of player and game and the

creation of meaning and transformation in intra-action that makes space for different take on gender politics in video games:

> An agential realism that accounts for the mutually constituted character of the material-discursive may allow for a greater sense of the complexity of the (re) production of both masculinity and femininity in game play.

The interventions by NM and ANT entail a fundamental critique of binary categories and essentialist positions of objectivity in knowledge production. Yet the move to redefine the relation between epistemology and ontology has also encountered unease and some of the more sweeping pronouncements have raised objections (for instance Ahmed, 2008). While the deconstruction of the Western basis of a normative sense of human agency is welcome, the current moment has also seen new, politically effective players emerge through increasingly autonomous, smart technologies and the perfected use of algorithmic possibilities that threaten to undermine liberal democracy.

CONTRIBUTION SUMMARIES

To open our issue, Frans Mäyrä offers a review of the cultural dimension of technology-related play and the interconnection between humans and their devices. Rather than further following the currently fashionable trail of technological agency, Mäyrä traces the scholarship on the phenomenological experience of games, mental-bodily relationships with games. In "The Player as a Hybrid: Agency in Digital Game Cultures", Mäyrä suggests that "our connections with games are also power relations that shape our agency in ways that we are not necessarily always aware of." Similar to the various ways in which games and game-characters are situated at a threshold, agency too emerges as a hybrid concept, in flux and determined both by technological modifications and cultural narratives, responding to a "fundamental hybridity built into the play situation itself."

In "Unhuman Agency: Reading Subjectivities in Playdead's Inside," Vicky Williams employs the figure of the "unhuman", rather than the more common "posthuman" and "nonhuman" lens, to link the topics of unruly agency and affect. While videogames enable an affective and embodied understanding of its distributed agencies, the unhuman, Williams suggests, make this communality strange. Combining elements from Barad's philosophy, affect and game theory with an analysis of Playdead's 2016 video game *Inside*, Williams argues that unanticipated agencies emerge through various subjectivities within the gameworld, and the player comes into contact with unhuman figurations such as the huddle or the swarm that are enacting, zombie-like, a temporality *after* human. Playing the game evokes a range of "weird affects" and the embodied and affective relationship with the gamespace allows the player to access "unhuman" subjectivities, not just through representation but

through phenomenological and affective modalities: procedurally through unanticipated interaction, vibrational and auditory feedback of controller. Williams links the range of "weird affects" evoked through the playing the game, the player's experience of compromised agency and recognition that they must participate in the unjust system of its gameworld to a larger ethical question, concluding that "*Inside* asks of its players to truly acknowledge how it feels to be played."

In "'You bastards may take exactly what I give you': Exploring Agential Realism as the Basis of a Novel Theory of Agency through *Return of the Obra Dinn*", Conor McKeown applies Barad's understanding of agency to Lucas Pope's nautical game. Moving away from understanding agency as options for or the illusion of potential actions, and towards Barad's understanding of agency as an "ongoing flow," which both precedes and produces things, McKeown demonstrates the use of Barad's philosophy for a deeper analysis of *Return of the Obra Dinn.* The relative limitations and lack of actionable choices are reframed – or diffracted – through Barad in such a way that players emerge not only as players through their "intra-action" with the game, but are themselves caught up in the "becoming" of matters around them. At key moments, the player is given no choice but to "reify the troubled, entangled histories" of colonialism, nationalism, racism and global capitalism. While such limitations are not limited to *Obra Dinn,* McKeown suggests that the game offers an exceptional example of how seemingly meaningless, small actions are fused with the production of a wide-reaching impact.

To close this section, Stephanie Jennings offers a comprehensive evaluation of the different perspectives framing video game agency in her essay "A Meta-Synthesis of Agency in Game Studies: Trends, Troubles, Trajectories," in which the author "advocates against totalising views of agency and contends that gaming agencies are plural potentialities". Positing a function much beyond the reach of the synthesis suggested in the methods, Jennings' analysis points at the "interrelatedness and divergence" of these studies, ultimately individuating "tremors of thematic trends and tensions" that are here used to "expose the assumptions that undergird a field's conceptual apparatuses". Through these categories, Jennigs develops a compelling framework which highlights the assumptions and blind-spots of agential research on video games. Jennings calls for a less prescriptive approach to this category, one that does not assume its connotation as embedded in heternormative western hegemonic relationships, and that instead opens up to the possibility of undoing its active-passive binarism. In this sense, the lack of agency associated with the video game-player techno-human assemblage might be not just a refusal to subscribe those neoliberal rhetorics of self-determination often contested by researchers in this field, but actually a radical move towards understanding other relational possibilities such as the agencies of communal interdependency, those of gender performativity, and the agencies of queer failure.

CRITICAL NOTES

The Critical Notes offer an overview on agency through the analysis of games which each foreground different topics emergent from this concept. In "Epistemology of the Werewolf: Monsters, Closet and the Queer Agency of *One Night Ultimate Werewolf*", Jack Warren offers a queer reading of the party game *One Night Ultimate Warewolf*, drawing parallels between its game mechanics of hiding/uncovering and the exprience of the closet for queer individuals. Warren provides as "too-close reading" of the game, using Esteban Muñoz's idea of "playing the game" in relation to closeted queer performances within heteronormative communities. In fact, like the werewolves in *One Night*, Muñoz's queer subjects play a game of hiding in plain sight, mimicking the normative behaviours and trying to "pass" as straight. The centrality of "secrecy" in relation to the closet and its parallelism with *One Night* echoes the work of anthropologist and historian Johan Huizinga according to whom the sacrality of play as ritual is always embedded in exclusionary discourses that rely on secrecy in order to perpetuate themselves.

In a close reading of *Metal Gear Solid V*, Luca Papale and Russelline François explore how players' agency at times collides with auteurial intentions. This single game allows a nuanced interpretation of various dimensions of agency, such as the illusion of agency experienced by the player or the agency of the game itself when impeding repetitions or hidden constructions of singular events. "'I am Big Boss, and you are, too…' Player identity and agency in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*" thus opens the always already political dimension of the concept, as the experience of agency in the game is designed in such a way as to invite implicitly "realist" readings of nuclear disarmament politics, and balance of deterrence as necessary evil.

Alison Meints and Josiah Green take up the absence of disabled bodies in video games in "Player Agency and Representations of Disability in *Borderlands 2*." Meints/Green suggest that "simulating disability for the player on a procedural level can be a significant challenge for game designers" and that the design of *Borderlands 2* synergises persuasive visual and procedural rhetoric. In an extensive close-reading of *Borderlands,* the authors explore how the game's rhetoric allows a rare encounter with various non-able bodies, revealing disability as a social construct rather than a flaw or physical failing. They thus uncover both potentially subversive and ableist tactics present in the game. Their analysis demonstrates that this social model of disability within the game co-exists in tension with some ableist slurs and harmful stereotypes.

Miguel Cesar offers an analysis of agency in the game *Shadow of The Colossus* within the context of 21st century Japan. In fact, in "Playing with the Player. Agency Manipulation in *Shadow of the Colossus* and Japanese Computer Games", the author argues for the modulation of agency between the freedom of the game's open world and the linearity of its progression as a reflection of the fluctuation of agency in Japanese subjectivity during the Lost Decades (1990-2010).

In this time of social turmoil, values in Japanese society shift from the dependability of social and economic institutions to the neoliberal ideals of self-determination and personal responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS: BEYOND ANGENCY

Our starting point was to consider agency as something that is *given* or *taken, afforded* or *claimed,* where agency is constructed as a tangible aspect of power relations. We sought to question the neoliberal discourse on agency as giving a chance and choice to everyone (playing a game), free and equally, as a function of meritocracy, requiring the subjects to self-determine and to be held accountable for their own actions as social agents. In this sense, video games are a perfect playground for the rehearsal of our neoliberal subjectivity, as they demand that we take charge of the action on screen, providing us with virtually perfect feedback and infinite opportunities for improvement via endless trial-and-error cycles in which each failure is reinscribed as one step toward the mastery of a challenge. Such mythologisation of human action can be easily read within ideological discourses promoting the "personal utility of play" (Henricks, 2015, p. 7) as part of neoliberal rhetorics: the play ethos that emerges in individualistic and economically developed societies which champion reflexivity and self-directing, rejecting instead ideas of passivity and dependency. However, a closer look at theories of video game agency reveals its ambivalent relationship with such neoliberal discourses. On the one hand, if video games offer a space for rehearsing discourses of agency and individual empowerment, design theory allows us to contextualise such agentic subjectivities as constructed and, consequently, dependent on the socio-cultural infrastructure that generates them. Indeed, one of the big lessons in design points at the nature of virtual agency as not resulting from complete freedom, but rather from channelling users' activity via constraints which are justified and naturalised to our eyes, consequently preventing their questioning. On the other hand, the appropriative and subversive nature of play and the unstable material nature of video games as digital artifacts resist their complete co-optation within neoliberal logics, as users claim agency outside its pre-designed borders, modding, performing, cheating and overall transforming them in unexpected ways. User-generated content such as Davey Wreden's mod *The Stanley Parable* not only manifests the subversive charge of play in resisting its own commodification and sanitisation –achieved by combining the procedurality of games with the algorithmic nature of simulations– but it also exemplifies video games' self-reflexive questioning of neoliberal agency, using a omniscient voiceover which celebrates the software's capacity to predict players' every move, anticipating their choices and devoiding them of meaning.

Without negating the existence of these power relations and, at the same time, the possibility to bring about change, in the course of our investigation on the theoretical capacity and political potential of agency, our attention

shifted towards understanding agency as based in and emerging from *interactions*: actions occurring between multiple actors. Such emphasis on the relational nature of agency already weakens the individualist premise of an isolated player wielding agency, unfettered and "free". Yet even in reconceptualisations of agency that let go of a human carrier and intentionality and instead consider its emergence from an entanglement or an impermanent assemblage of matter and being, the term "agency" is still invested in defining some kind of force or power that produces an effect.

Coincidentally, within patriarchal culture, this conceptual image is still closely linked to the ideas of strength, effort, labour, potency, vigour, imposition, and even violence. Articulating the relationship between capitalist development and globalisation, Taitu Heron argues: "Agency, limited to this western and masculinist definition under capitalist development would be individualist with a tendency towards autocracy for the achievement of its own ends" (2008, p. 87). Against such inscriptions, we have encountered the strange force of different relational modes such as interinterpassivity, dependency and vulnerability, which lie dormant in agency, prompting us to change the premises of the question: why agency? This paradigmatic shift leads us to question the idea of agency *hic et nunc* as altogether neoliberal and irredeemably phallocentric, obsessed with achievement, progress, growth and control. Is agency needed in order to experience individual and social participation in the world or are there productive forms of relinquishing one's agency? Robert Yang's *Radiator* (2009-2015) is, like *The Stanley Parable*, another example of Source engine mods that resist the spectacular action characterising the original game *Half Life 2* (Valve Corporation, 2004), focusing instead on mini-games that operate a self-reflexive critique of agency. As argued by Tom Welch (2018), "Yang decisively undermines the traditional mechanics of the game in order to make an artistic statement about a failing relationship." In fact, the game explores the relationship between two men, James and Dylan, across three chapters, each making use of simple mechanics that mirror different relational moments between the two characters: "Polaris" uses a star-gazing puzzle mechanic that requires players to follow John's indication, tracing constellations in the sky; "Handle With Care" takes place during a couples therapy session within Dylan's mind, which is represented as a warehouse where players must practice the titular "care" in rearranging the fragile boxes representing his responses in the dialogue with John and the therapist; finally, in "Much Madness" players are confronted with the final moments of Dylan's life, as he wanders through Emily Dickinson's house in order to revisit the fragmented memories of his relationship with John. As the screen fades to black, a flat-heartbeat sound signals Dylan passing away, while on screen the medical report informs us of his cause of death: "HIV-related nephropathy (HIVAN) – end-stage renal disease (ESRD)." *Radiator* does not only deprive the player of video games' ultimate agentic pleasure, that of survival, but it also productively explores chains of

Figure 2 – Dylan's mind represented as a factory in the episode "Handle With Care" from *Radiator* (Robert Yang, 2009-2015).

inter-passive reactions as a way to represent queer relational experiences, as the player is required to fill in Dylan's gestures in spite of his unavoidable demise. As exemplified by *The Stanley Parable* and *Radiator*, modding practices can allow players to experience subjective modes not grounded in neoliberal ideas of progress and self-determination, using the inter-passive relationship with rules and algorithmic procedures to highlight relational labour and resist agentic narrations of failure as progress.

The gendered and classist discourse on passive versus active media has been a precursor to such questions, when television embodied the apex of modernity and, at the same time, the capitalist dream of mindless consumption. That debate led to the deconstruction of the rhetoric of passivity and the claiming of active audienceship, which ended up reproducing the myth of the "active subject." While authors such as Slavoj Žižek (1998) warned of links between emergent interactive forms and the displacement of labour and affect in the interpassive subject – the sanitised "I feel bad about world affairs" produced by mediatised experiences – some of the scholarship in play theory presented in this issue challenges the inter-active/passive dichotomy by looking, for example, at games based on care-taking mechanics. With this issue of *G/A/M/E,* we call for a reconsideration of agency not only in light of its long interdisciplinary history and resurfacing in gaming culture, but also against its prompt disposal of other relational modes – such as interpassivity, dependency and vulner-

ability – that inhabit its discursive periphery. In this sense, games do not only constrain players' activity to produce an illusion of agency, but can also tap into our desire for giving up control and letting go of being in charge, potentially resisting their neoliberal function.

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FRANS MÄYRÄ
Tampere University
frans.mayra@tuni.fi

The Player as a Hybrid:

Agency in Digital Game Cultures

ABSTRACT

This article studies the player as a hybrid: a particular compound version of subjectivity that emerges from involvement with the contents, cultures and technologies of games. Drawing from both cultural studies of technology and phenomenology of game play, the article aims to connect key historical works in cultural technology studies with game and play studies to open perspectives into the tensions and potential conflicts that underlie the empowerment and expansion of gaming self. While engaging in game play provides us with novel opportunities for experiencing alternate realities and developing our abilities, our connections with games are also power relations that shape our hybrid, cultural agency in ways that we are not necessarily always aware of. The increasing intermingling of technology and play has consequences for players' agency that are revealed to be simultaneously empowering and limiting. The multiple identified areas of tension in the constitution of hybrid player agency also suggest a non-essentialist approach to understanding games, players and playing.

KEYWORDS: *agency, game controllers, game culture, phenomenology, play, power, technology*

INTRODUCTION

This article is focused on understanding the player as a hybrid: a particular version of subjectivity that emerges from involvement with the contents, cultures and technologies of games. Drawing from both cultural studies of technology and phenomenology of game play, the article offers a historically informed look into the tensions and potential conflicts that underlie the empowerment and expansion of gaming self. While engaging in game play provides us with novel opportunities for experiencing alternate realities and developing our abilities, the intense connections with games are also power relations that shape our hybrid, cultural agency in ways that we are not necessarily aware of. Providing a wide, historically informed outline for understanding technology-related play both in its micro and macro dimensions is something that this article can offer

to the reader. While providing a comprehensive review of all relevant discussions within this very wide subject matter is impossible, the aims of this article are more modest: of providing milestones for mapping certain discursive spaces surrounding the hybridization of players' agency.

The conceptual background for the analysis of cultural agency in the digital era can be found by examining the human cultural relationship with technologies more generally. While agency is a critical component in games, its nature varies significantly from one game to another. Contrasts can be detected, for instance, between the agency of a player engrossed in controlling the wheels and pedals of a rally game in an arcade, of a player relaxing and passing time on a sofa while tapping away on a tablet game, a team of players intensely engaged in an eSports computer game at the grand finale of world championships, or yet another type of player, walking on the streets while participating in the location-based *Pokémon GO* (Niantic, 2016) mobile game, occasionally swiping on her smartphone.[1]

In general terms, agency in games is multi-layered, as various frame analyses applied to gaming have shown (e.g. Goffman, 1974; Fine, 1983). Some of the game studies into this area have particularly emphasised how the degree and character of agency differentiates games from other digital media, for example (e.g. Laurel, 1993; Murray, 1997). Ability to act within, and (re)configure the contents of games has been discussed by many game scholars as the hallmark of games from multiple perspectives, while differing in their view about the role of narrative, for example (Eskelinen, 2001; Mateas & Stern, 2005). More recently, the discussions of game agency have begun to acknowledge that games are not only the actions of their human operators, but equally also those of machines (Galloway, 2006, p. 5). Agency in digital games has evolved into a deeply complex and multidimensional phenomenon, partly due to the multiplicity of digital games and the vast differences between them, and partly due to the special characteristics of the technological, financial and sociocultural relations manifested in digital games. Different research traditions define agency in various ways, but at its heart, the term describes the capacity of an individual, a group or sometimes an institution to act in a given context. Discourses regarding agency have historically emphasised, among other things, different ideas on the role of free will and individual freedom and, on the other hand, agency that is determined on a collective level and by social structures (some of the key contributors in this tradition are Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Hegel and Marx). This article centres around a specific type of cultural agency that encompasses both collective elements, such as cultural history and different forms of expression (macro level), and individual choices and actions (micro level). In fact, cultural studies often combine the collective and the individual and define agency as a culturally and socially determined capability to act and make a difference (cf. Barker & Jane, 2016, p. 632).

1. Note on the use of personal pronouns: this article avoids using one personal pronoun exclusively about the player agency, and intentionally switches between female and male pronouns.

With regard to game progression, the effects of a player's actions are crucial in whether a game advances and whether the problems and challenges presented to the player by the game are solved. On the other hand, an individual that is immersed in a game transforms into a special, gamified hybrid (for an early theory of hybrid agency, see Haraway, 1991). The various dimensions of hybrid agency are typically influenced by, for example, a game's functionalities and the goals determined by the rules of a game as well as a player's physical interaction with the material manifestations of a digital game, such as game consoles and controllers. Furthermore, a player's sociocultural orientation towards games and gaming acquires added dimensions and new manifestations as it is enacted in an environment shaped by game code and programmed non-player characters guided by artificial intelligence.

We need perspectives for future research in this area that are based on close examinations of the ways in which the relationship between humans and game technology has been determined in the recent history of digital gaming. Such examination in this article is grounded on a discussion of highly tangible game-related technologies and the meanings associated with their use. Research on this topic has previously been published, inter alia, in the *Platform Studies* series (MIT Press), which aims to analyse the foundations of digital media technology from a cultural perspective by focusing on a single gadget or a gaming platform (see e.g. Montfort & Bogost, 2009).

In this article, hybrid agency is conceptualised through the circular dynamics of cultural production: existing physical and non-physical elements, which both construct and restrict agency in games, provide a groundwork for the development of expectations and competencies, which in turn inform the formation of new physical and non-physical game cultural elements in various ways (cf. Johnson 1986; Mäyrä 2007). Philosophically, this article aims to outline the interfaces between and the reconfigurations of material technology, digital contents and the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of human performances with the help of examples from the gaming context.

The starting point is a tangible and material object, a game controller, as well as its multifaceted role as the material interface between a human player and digital game. This initial focus is gradually expanded into various larger elements that shape game player agency.

CULTURES OF TECHNOLOGY

Modern games are inseparably linked with modern technologies, but compared to cultures of technology, game cultures constitute a fundamentally broader, or at least more complex, phenomenon. While digital media and information technology are key elements of modern electronic or video games, the various processes related to games, gaming, game design, the distribution and consumption of games, and the agency constructed in these processes are not limited to technology but also include key dimensions related to non-material

social customs, practices and norms. It is however useful to examine the cultural dimension of technology and its research tradition as a starting point to an analysis of the development of gaming and especially digital games.

One key analyst of technology cultures, Arnold Pacey (1983, p. 5; cf. also Pacey, 1999), highlights the way discussions about technology often emphasise the organisational level of technological systems or the technical, engineering dimension of how technology functions. However, these dimensions are shaped by deeper cultural values, norms and other structures that guide thinking and ways of experiencing, which play a key role in the development of creative activities in this field. Technology is fundamentally human activity guided and informed by cultural and ideological meaning structures. Thus, instead of nouns, technology is more conveniently conceptualised with verbs – as specific kinds of functions and activities. Pacey (1983, p. 6) depicts the multidimensional nature of technology through a model where the purely technical dimensions of technology are inseparable from cultural and organisational phenomena, such as the goals, values and principles of financial interactions intrinsic to each society.

One of the most common lines of analysis in the philosophy of technology seeks to understand the interconnection between human and his devices. Among the first modern endeavours was *Technics and Civilization* by an American architect and theorist Lewis Mumford, which was published already in 1934. Mumford (2010, p. 14) discusses the mechanical clock as one practical example of a technology that was intrinsically connected to a comprehensive cultural shift that changed how people lived, thought and organised their societies. A mechanical conceptualisation of time ushered in a new routine and, for its part, furthered many new ways of social organisation. However, even the most automatic machine produces nothing of significance if it is separated from people, culture and society – it is only in this (situated) framework that its physical-mechanical operations acquire a sociocultural purpose and meaning. Mumford differentiated between a *tool* and a *machine*: a human employs a tool as a part and a direct extension of his craft, while a machine operates with a higher degree of autonomy.

The technological determinism embedded in Mumford's thinking has been widely criticised in more recent research (see e.g. Lemola, 2000). Pacey's (1983, pp. 8-11) example of the hand pumps that were installed in Indian villages in the 1960s and 1970s to provide better access to water highlights the significance of sociocultural practices and values in relation to technological activity. In the period leading up to 1975, over 150,000 wells were drilled in Indian villages suffering from drought, each of them provided with new pumps. According to reports from authorities, as many as two thirds of the pumps soon ceased to function. Mechanical improvements to the pumps did not eliminate the problem: instead, the failures continued. It was not until people started actively paying attention to how water management and the tasks and values related to it were organised in the villages, discovering that the use of the pump could

either be in conflict with this local system or become an integral part of it, that more sustainable results were achieved.

It may be that sometimes and, in some contexts, play and digital games can face similar destiny as those new Indian water pumps. There are studies that suggest, for example, that the attitudes towards engaging with playful designs and play elements in work-related contexts are culturally determined but also subject to change (Dippel & Fizek, 2017; Kultima et al., 2018). Even the most playfully designed game (or, work environment) does not play itself; in order to operate, playfulness and play as a practice needs to be an organic element of the culture and rooted within the context in question.

DIGITAL GAME: THE FIRST CONTACT

The early stages of digital game cultures were often characterised by people informally and experimentally appropriating technological infrastructures designed for other purposes. The space combat game *Spacewar!* is a good example. Early mainframe computers were expensive investments and were mainly utilised for financial, administrative, scientific and military applications due to their ability to handle large amounts of data and perform complex calculations. The DEC PDP-1 computer, which was acquired in early 1960s by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), was exceptional, as it was available for free experimentation by the university's staff and students. In 1962 this playful freedom bore fruit, and the local programmer community, with the lead of Steve Russell, developed a "space game" inspired by science fiction. Since fiercely pressing the buttons on the control panel of a wardrobe-sized computer was in many ways troublesome, the developers decided to build a separate handheld controller, which became one of the first dedicated game controllers (Donovan, 2010, p. 11). The controller had sideways switches for controlling the movement of the ship (e.g. jumping to 'hyperspace') and a separate button for firing space torpedoes (see Figure 1, next page).

Dubbed as 'minicomputer', DEC PDP-1 represented advanced information technology in the early 1960s. It had 2,700 transistors[3] and weighed over 500 kilograms. Compared to previous mainframe computers with price tags of millions of dollars, PDP-1 was affordable at 120,000 dollars (in US dollars of 1960).[4] In fact, the evolution of prices in information technology had significant consequences not only for the spread and accessibility of technology but also for the development of user cultures, values and attitudes around technology. The use of PDP-1 was not restricted at MIT in ways that were typical in the 1950s for mainframe computers (Levy, 2010, pp. 15, 33-50).

In early depictions of hacker culture, the relationship between information technology, its users and its developers is described as very close, almost symbiotic. However, this type of intense relationship with information technology is nothing exceptional. In her books *The Second Self* (1984) and *Life on the Screen* (1995), psychologist Sherry Turkle discusses the development and diversifica-

3. Computer History Museum. 2011. "Inventing the Transistor – PDP-1 Computer". http://www.computerhistory.org/revolution/digital-logic/12/273/1370

4. Computer History Museum. 2005. "Specifications – PDP-1 Computer". http://www.computerhistory.org/pdp-1/specifications

Figure 1 – Dan Edwards (left) and Peter Samson playing Spacewar! on a PDP-1 Type 30 display. (Image source: Computer History Museum, www.computerhistory.org)[2]

tion of personal relationships with information technology across decades. She emphasises that for a large group of people, information technology has for a long time had a relatively limited and instrumental role: computers were simply tools they needed to perform certain tasks at work.

However, the proliferation of consumer electronics, home computers and video game consoles has changed this picture. In a leisure context, one's relationship to a personal computer or a game console can develop into something deeper – it can become "cultured" in a more comprehensive sense of the word. In fact, many people report in Turkle's studies how their interactions with information technology changed their self-relationship, led them to a new profession, introduced them to new relationships or prompted them to develop their aesthetic ideals, cultures and value systems (Turkle, 1984, pp. 155-56). Turkle's more recent works *Alone Together* (2012) and *Reclaiming Conversation* (2016) take a significantly more critical stance towards human's relationship with information and communication technologies, especially as we have become increasingly aware of the social consequences of ubiquitous online media use in the

2. Computer History Museum. 2005. "PDP-1 Computer". http://www.computerhistory.org/pdp-1/a87ddd9510aeebf6485c47a35f8a26aa

last decade. One consequence of the expansion and transformation of the early hacker and hobbyist (sub)cultures into cultural mainstream has been the spread of games and the associated ludification of culture (Dippel & Fizek, 2017; Walz & Deterding, 2015). This development has also evoked its share of concern and criticism, as well as enthusiasm (Kowert & Quandt, 2015).

A GAME THAT PLAYS THE PLAYER

The relationship between human and information technology has seen especially intense and multidimensional development in the field of electronic games. An early incarnation of a two-player digital game of skill such as *Spacewar!* offers a simulated playground for space warfare, where a player's skill with the game controller as well as his strategic ability to move spacecrafts, to use the gravity star at the centre of the playing field and to fire torpedoes become critical. Digital games soon developed to offer single-player options where computers, in addition to creating a game world, provide various programmed opponents and challenges. A human player ultimately has the decisive responsibility: without a player's active engagement with a game's challenges, the game will not be able to fulfil its role in creating a game experience. (Fully automated, so-called *zero-player* games provide an interesting extreme example – see e.g. the analyses by Fizek, 2018). In the performance of gameplay, information technology has an all-encompassing role: the aesthetic experience created by a game is an ecosystem where the gaming device, the software code, the game world, characters, fiction and other dimensions become entangled. The player herself, with her individual skills, motivations and capabilities, also plays an important role. It is perhaps impossible that even identical games, gaming devices and the same game program code would ever be experienced as exactly identical phenomenological entities by different people. This is analogous to the ways in which the "concretization" of text operates during the act of reading, analysed earlier in the fields of reception aesthetics and reader-response of literary studies (Ingarden, 1931; Iser, 1978). A beginner's game session may end abruptly due to a lack of required skills. On the other hand, gaming virtuosos may play with their own idiosyncratic styles and distinctive strategies. Looking at game design, the basic idea of many popular open world games, which are typically not only spatially non-limiting but also designed to support various strategies (e.g. so-called *sandbox games*), could be argued to operate as encouragement for players to experiment with significantly varied ways of playing. It is indeed difficult to discuss such fundamental features of games as them being designed to be "open" or "closed" without also taking into account the skill and performance of a player as the agent of play (Juul, 2002).

The gaming device, as well as its physical controllers and digital software code, can be examined as an instrument-like entity. A player must understand the possibilities and restrictions of a game and its controllers in order to successfully interact with the game. The relationship between "game object" and player

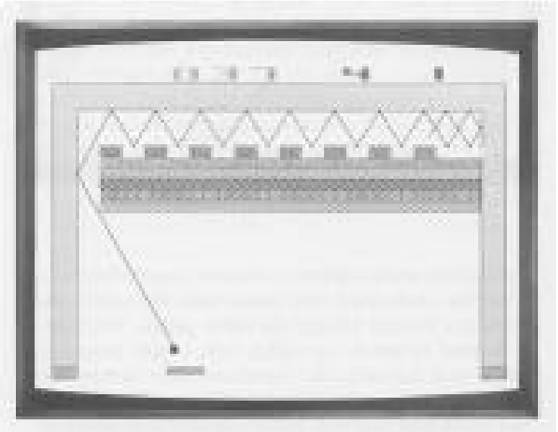
is further discussed by Espen Aarseth (2007), who applies the thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer to modern game research. Games and play are at the centre of Gadamer's thinking on the ontology of the artwork. In his book *Truth and Method* (1960), Gadamer develops the idea that what is essential to the allure of games and playing is the fact that an individual must surrender his freedom while playing: in reality, contrary to the popular belief, rather than player being in charge, "the game plays the player" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 106). Similarly, at the core of Gadamerian aesthetics more generally lies a desire to understand the objective essence of an artwork which informs our subjective experiences of it. There are limits to this power relationship though. If the player has no skill, the game is not capable of utilising its fundamental potential to direct the act of playing.

In addition to Gadamer, Aarseth (2007) applies Wolfgang Iser's (1978) concept of the implied reader to game research by developing a theory of the *implied player.* This theory posits that each game as a hermeneutic and aesthetic object contains within itself a set of instructions to play it. The theory identifies an ideal (and theoretical) implied player, which describes a player capable of playing a particular game in a way that allows all of its built-in aesthetic potential to unfold through actual events in the gameplay to the fullest extent possible. This hermeneutic approach to game research differs from the more strongly empirical and social science approaches, which (at least from an Aarsethian viewpoint) focus less on games as works of art and more on the gaming of diverse empirical and historical individuals and the meanings and contexts they assign to games in their own lives. On the other hand, Aarseth himself emphasises the opportunity of a critical player to deviate from or rebel against the embedded position of an obedient model player. The different knowledge interests are nevertheless crucial to note here: while one approach seeks to understand a style of playing a game that is typical to or characteristic of a certain group, the other is interested in an idiosyncratic playing style which provides insights on (or even expands) the nature of the game as a piece of art.

PHENOMENOLOGY OF GAMING: SUDNOW

There have been only a handful of individual analyses that have sought to examine the intense, ontologically deep connection between game and player. But then again, on the other hand, a large number of studies on the topic have depicted, for example, the experiences of flow associated with gaming (e.g. Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005) or immersion in gaming and game worlds (e.g. Ermi & Mäyrä, 2007), but it is less often that this type of psychologically oriented research engages in a deeper analysis of the concrete game-related practices that form the unique interaction between game and player. Game experience research (often relying on computer-human interaction methodologies) also seldom adopts a broader, philosophical approach to examining a player's agency and its characteristics – though, from contemporary game philosophy some such discussions of experiences can be found (see e.g. Leino, 2010; Gualeni,

2015). As an exception among the early work in the player experience studies stands out David Sudnow's book *Pilgrim in the Microworld* (1983). Sudnow was a pianist and sociologist famous both for his method of piano teaching (*The Sudnow Method*) and his books on the topic (e.g. *Ways of the Hand*, 1978/2001). *Pilgrim in the Microworld* describe his ceaseless efforts to master the Atari 2600 version of the video game classic *Breakout* (1978) as fully as possible, while also acquiring a deeper understanding of the game's essence. His detailed, micro-level analyses on the mastery of the manual game controller as essentially intertwined with the ways of thinking about gameplay lead in Sudnow' thinking into ideas of how information technologies will provide the next step in the line of "quintessential human instruments" like piano and typewriter (cf. Figures 2 and 3).



Figures 2 and 3 – The simulated paddles of Breakout (Atari, 1978) and the hand moving the physical game controller (Sudnow, 1983, pp. 27, 29).

In Sudnow's phenomenological close reading, the agency of a digital game player appears as an interestingly contradictory phenomenon. On one hand, the gamer subject is an evolving virtuoso, the self-aware focus of resolute practice and study. On the other hand, he is an object subordinate to a game, whose agency is shaped by hours of patient and disciplined efforts to internalise the requirements stipulated in the game's program code. In fact, Sudnow's concept of a game player as a subject who is both emancipated and escaping (or lost) into the game world, points to an observation of games as Foucauldian technologies of the self – technologies that help subjects change and evolve as entities that encompass body, mind, thinking, behaviour and ways of being (Foucault, 1988). From a Foucauldian perspective, technologies of the self are also inseparable from power: by observing the gamer subject, we can recognise how his concern for himself and the development of his subjectivity – in this case, player agency – is simultaneously a submission as a part of a game's structure and mechanisms. The player's agency is realised within the framework set by the game and, in an inherent conflict, experiences the restricted freedom of the game both as em-

powering and objectifying. In similar lines, Andrew Silverman and Bart Simon (2009) have written about the "timetabling of movement" and "ranking of behaviors" leading into a "micro-physics of power" through which bodies can be made docile; and also Felan Parker (2011) has made an analogous interpretation, arguing that what he calls "expansive gameplay", allows people to "enjoy the illusion of liberty while their real lives remain unchallenged and unchanged".

The analyses of power in gameplay and game culture have gradually expanded and grown more nuanced. Following Sudnow, Brendan Keogh has written an engaging account of our mental-bodily relationships with games and game controllers in his *A Play of Bodies* (2018). He notes that if videogame play is "embodied textuality", then to play a videogame requires an "embodied literacy". As he notes, the "literate videogame player knows in their hands the way around the conventional spatial syntax of the input device, has a basic understanding of the performative grammar of different videogame genres […] and is able to transport and adapt this literacy from one videogame to the next" (ibid., p. 91). The micro level interactions of players' hands and gaming controllers are thus sites from where one can move into making more general level conclusions about games in culture, and also about the construction of game playing agency.

THE DUAL NATURE OF PLAYER AGENCY

Changing the perspective to a bit higher level of abstraction, an American game and media researcher Bob Rehak (2003) illustrates the dualisms and tensions of player agency in his analysis of avatars. Within the framework of a game, an avatar that represents a player "is" the player, meaning that its function is to embody or expand the player's agency within the internal world of the game, while also being separate from the player. An avatar's abilities and characteristics are determined and developed in the 'magic circle' of the game (Stenros, 2014), which is based on a programmed system of rules and the dynamic goals and game mechanics derived from that system. In a classic, "8-bit" style video game such as *Breakout,* the player is represented by a cursor-like, simple game tool or a controllable, simplistic pixel character. Rehak nevertheless emphasises that advancements in information technology in the context of game design have generated an increasing focus on game fiction, which relates especially to aspects such as the visual and narrative complexity of game characters and game worlds and the internal realism of a simulation. Meanwhile, the tension underlying the game character has intensified: it has maintained its basic function as a cursor or a game tool, which is the focus of Sudnow's *Breakout* analysis that emphasises hand-eye coordination. Then again audiovisually impressive, often strikingly film-like modern games provide opportunities for identification and immersion where a subject engrossed in play transforms and expands not only as a more or less virtual problem-solver in the playing field but also as an implied subject within a game fiction whose tangible, experiential character is in various ways supported by increasingly powerful digital,

audiovisual and haptic technologies. Thus, instead of the skilful handling of a game tool, the central promise and objective of gaming would be shifting towards identification with game fictions, immersion in realistically modelled game worlds and merging with game characters.

Bob Rehak underscores the fact that in game analysis, we inevitably must consider the dual nature of our player agency – the game character as an extension of ourselves but also as a separate character, external to ourselves. A game or a game character never follows its player's wishes and commands completely seamlessly or smoothly. Especially the early stages of a game involve a significant number of frustrating fumbles and often-repeated failures. Bugs in the game code may also lead to a game getting stuck or crashing in a way that acts as a crucial reminder of the fundamental separateness between the player and the reality of the game. Game characters are also programmed with skills and tendencies that have their own, separate nature from each player's personality and abilities. In a deeper sense, our daily relationships with ourselves already contain in themselves the same dualistic dimension. Rehak (2003, p. 123) refers specifically to psychoanalytic and post-structural studies on the self/subject and how our sense of self is partly determined in a tensioned relationship between the observer and the observed (cf. Lacan, 1966). According to Rehak, video games exploit this basic dynamic, in which we essentially have an avatar-like relationship with ourselves. Daniel Vella (2015) has developed the dual model of "ludic subject" in the phenomenological frame further, to take into account how players are positioned both as game-internal actors, and as game-external observers of their own actions.

David Owen, who has analysed the affective potential of video games (2017, p. 31), emphasises that rather than reinforcing a traditional Cartesian mind–body dichotomy, games have to do with a deep connection between mind and body that is intensified by experiences of immersion and merging. The tradition of existential phenomenology has sought to distance itself from the essentialism of a thinking self and to understand agency and the self in a broader framework. Andy Clark and David Chalmers (1998) outline a theory of *extended mind*, which is based on the deep connections, interactions and mergers that constantly take place between mind and body, as well as between various tools, environments and objects. Owen points out that in an increasingly games-saturated, ludic culture and society where games, game characters, game technologies and game worlds are a central component of many people's everyday experience, the connection between the features of a game and the mind and body of its player is also real and all-encompassing. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1991) discusses in his research the state of *flow*, which in the midst of a game can be an intense experience: the player 'forgets herself' and for a moment becomes one with the game, the game character and the events of the game. Gordon Calleja (2011) has argued that flow experience in game play is actually a merger of two forms of "immersive" experiences: transportation into another

reality, and absorption into engaging activity. Our earlier study has also identified the importance of imaginative engagement with games and play as fiction, as a third key dimension in player experiences (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2007).

Danish game researcher Jesper Juul (2005) illustrates the negotiation of a player being both simultaneously in-game and out-game with his idea of games as 'half-real'. While playing, physically and mentally real players commit to a set of rules that have real-life consequences. At the same time, the game also advances as an imagined and fictional phenomenon in the players' minds: sometimes a player's choices may be based on the priorities dictated by the rules of the game, other times concerns that are internal to the game fiction, such as drama between two game characters or the game narrative, take precedence in the player's mind and experience (the discussion on game fictionality has been further developed e.g. in Tavinor, 2012; Meskin & Robson, 2012). The complex negotiations that are required by the playing agent to navigate between these diverse orientations and the multi-layered reality of games have been discussed especially in the context of role play. Players' negotiations between different dimensions related to game mechanics, game worlds and game characters have been described in a model that identifies three basic orientations (*Threefold Model*). The model distinguishes between players for whom the fundamental reality of games has to do with solving challenges and winning, players for whom playing is first and foremost about creating and participating in an interesting story, and players who appreciate the internal logic and ontological coherence of the game world. These player types are referred to as the *dramatist*, the *gamist*, and the *simulationist* (Kim, 1998). The "same" game is not actually the same kind of game, when players differ. This suggests that there exist further dimensions of complexity in the power dynamics that are embedded in or surround the player-game dual-form agency.

THE EXPANDING AND TENSIONED CONNECTIONS OF GAME AGENCY

One framework that is special to agency in games relates to not only the physical, embodied connection between game tool and player highlighted by Sudnow in his *Breakout* analysis but also to the consequences of the playtime and the numerous repetitions necessitated by a challenging game to a player subject. A player must improve in order to advance, which means his agency also transforms – a beginner becomes a competent player and, with time, possibly a virtuoso fully versed in the nuances of a particular game. On a basic level this is true for all learning: our experiences and challenges transform us, and we become different people with age and experience. In the context of an extensive and multidimensional game, however, this learning and change in agency may be subtle and all-embracing. This can be exemplified by extensive online role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft* (WoW; Blizzard, 2004-). Scott Rettberg (2008) describes in his first-hand accounts the hundreds of hours he spent in the fictional fantasy world of Azeroth while playing WoW. Through his hunter

character, he not only participated in experiencing and developing the shared interactive story world but he also became involved in the virtual economy and progression-based challenge structure of the game. He noticed that using his resources inefficiently caused him to fall behind his fellow players, so that the game practically forced him to study its revenue generation and exchange logic as well as to identify optimal strategies for developing the abilities and assets of his character. There was a hidden power dynamic that had an ideological dimension, which subjected the WoW player as its object. Recalling Althusser's theory of ideology, Rettberg states that a game such as WoW with its virtual currencies and electronic marketplaces is a significantly more elaborate and extensive technology to train the citizens of a capitalist society than, for example, the traditional board game *Monopoly* (Parker Brothers, 1935-). David Owen (2017, p. 165) also remarks that blurring of the virtual and the real can have deep ideological effects to the construction of our agency.

In Sudnow's case, an analytical player could observe in micro-level detail how his physical agency was constructed in a circle governed by the game device, its controllers and the feedback loops of game functions programmed in a virtual playing field. In modern games, these feedback loops are formed by the dynamics created by the game controller and the digital-physical game tool, as well as the various additional layers coded in the development logic of a virtual character, for instance, or similar dynamic processes in the social structures enabled by the game or in its virtual economy. A skilled player succeeds in mastering several of these different dimensions as seamlessly as possible: in addition to being able to play the game in a technical sense, she also understands the boundary conditions for the progress of her game character in the networks of skills, equipment and professional and social structures.

However, it is a sad reality that even a motivated, aware and competent player cannot grasp today all of the numerous industrial, financial, technological and technocultural causalities and power dynamics that form the complex networks in which her game cultural agency is constructed and realised and whose pressures she is subjected to. When a player voluntarily surrenders to a game, devoting perhaps hundreds of hours of his time in order to produce virtual goods or to pursue higher status for her game character, in addition to creating a game cultural meaning and identity for herself (Mia Consalvo discusses 'gaming capital' in an applied Bordieuan sense; see Consalvo, 2007), she also, through her efforts, participates in a system that aims to generate profits for a commercial company, among many other things.

Game cultural agency, just as cultural and social agency in general, is marked by asymmetrical power relations and various internal tensions. Financial and industrial power relations represent one dimension of the phenomenon: players who modify games, i.e. 'modders', essentially provide free labour to game companies and rarely have acknowledged rights to the content they create (e.g. Kücklich, 2005). On the other hand, gaming is also a contested area

from the perspective of cultural values. Immersing oneself into the world of games and play may be acceptable for children and adolescents, but adult play has traditionally been regarded as suspect. An essential component of Christian heritage, as in northern Protestant culture, has been the sinfulness of games and many other aspects of popular or 'low' culture. Card games, for instance, have been associated with the risks of gambling as well as negative norms related to the 'wasting' of time (for the sinfulness of gambling, see Matilainen, 2017). Max Weber (1905/1990) describes the traditions of thinking and behaviour related to religious and societal norms wherein especially Western and Northern European societies developed a link between human dignity and hard labour and, correspondingly, between leisure and sin.

After discussing such macro level dynamics cross-cutting late modern culture and society, it is important to remember that even today, a person grabbing a game controller faces the same basic challenge that confronted David Sudnow in the early 1980s: how can one control a game while accepting that one is also controlled by it? Gaming has certainly undergone a great transformation and become more diverse over the decades due to developments in technology and digital game culture. Some evidence for this can be found from statistics. According to the Finnish Player Barometer, for instance, which maps the phenomenon of gaming in Finland, nearly 90 percent of Finns play a game at least once a month. Some 60 per cent play a digital game regularly. Puzzle games, such as different word games, sudokus, card games and crosswords are the most popular category of games among children, adolescents and senior citizens alike (Kinnunen, Lilja & Mäyrä, 2018). Mainstream game culture is thus not focused on skills challenges such as described by Sudnow or challenges of gameplay that require absolute precision with a game controller and a continuous development of one's skills. In quantitative terms, games played as a pastime or for mainly social reasons are a more significant phenomenon than skill-based play (Kallio, Mäyrä & Kaipainen, 2011; Juul, 2010). This is connected to changes in the discourse on gaming: in the 21st century, gaming is increasingly regarded as commonplace, just another part of people's everyday lives. The hybrid nature of game cultural agency – its diversity and complexity – nonetheless characterises even the more leisurely aspects of game culture. It is important to keep in mind that game cultural agency is constantly reshaped and developed by people, individuals and groups who have cultivated various motivations, abilities and opportunities to exert influence within cultural and societal structures.

CONCLUSION

Games offer experiences to their players which are in various ways rewarding and enriching, but an analysis of game cultural agency draws attention to the multiple power positions, tensions and potential for conflict that are also inherent to games. When faced with the challenges of gameplay, a player inevitably develops and transforms as a subject. At the same time, this activity and change

lead to the development of a unique, mixed and complex player-game agency within the framework of games and their power structures. A player naturally always has opportunities to defy the programmed plan or script of a game. She can also try to oppose or protest the sexism and stereotypical gender roles that are still present in character descriptions and game marketing, for example. It is however impossible to fully detach oneself from the networks of structural power that entangle the various areas or dimensions of hybrid game agency.

There are ongoing developments in areas such as location-based gaming, and in play that takes place with augmented reality and with the use of smart objects (that can be various sensor-enabled toy-game hybrids, for example) that all suggest increasing blending of physical and digital dimensions in play situations. Arguably play and games have also become more tolerated or even appreciated parts of culture and society, finding applications in multiple, previously distinct areas of life, such as education, leisure and working life. Physical-digital hybrids and experiments in work-play hybridity underline the visible and expanding role that hybrid play has in contemporary, post-industrial society. The discussion in this article has nevertheless suggested that the roots of hybrid play go even deeper. As there are multiple, micro and macro level power relations that both enable and restrict agency in all play, there is fundamental hybridity built into the play situation itself. The above analysis suggests an anti-essentialist way of understanding game, player, and the act of playing: none of these elements exists in isolation, but rather emerge as interdependent aspects of play that is fundamentally rooted in boundary-breaking hybridity.

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VICKI WILLIAMS
University of Birmingham,
Department of English
VRW203@student.bham.ac.uk

Unhuman Agency
Reading Subjectivities in Playdead's *Inside*

ABSTRACT
Videogames and their systems of play are continuously defined through their slipperiness, i.e. their affective capacities that attend to realms beyond the human, producing agencies which escape and exceed human grasp. Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives of agency, phenomenology and affect theory, this paper will conceptualise Unhuman Agency, and its emergence in Playdead's 2016 videogame *Inside*. The paper will argue that the mutations of the human subject in the game mark a distinct movement towards various kinds of material slipperiness which challenge human/player agency. This paper will look at the ways player agency is continually at odds with the world inside, and how this lack of agency opens up aesthetic, social, and political tensions present within the game-world. Via Unhuman thematics, *Inside* represents a world of authoritarian agencies which implicate various bodily rhetorics (Foucault, 1975), requiring players to un-learn agency and common gaming mechanics to adapt to the unique logics and movements present within the game's eerie landscape.

KEYWORDS: *Unhuman agency, affect, embodiment, phenomenology, Inside*

Videogames toy with agency. The medium's affordances when it comes to player agency are rich and entangled, creating dialogues between play and programmed systems. Yet, unanticipated agencies emerge out of and beyond the programmable corners of videogame systems. There are multiple interactions and interrelations between a game's narrative, environment, material components and player embodiment that see control and agency dispersed between ontological layers. Such forms of agency emerge procedurally when (human) player and (nonhuman) system interact with one another in unanticipated ways. As one aspect of opening new discourses around the ways agency emerges as an aesthetic, social, and political factor within videogame play, this article will consider the ways that a lack or distribution of agency reveals legitimate and novel tensions. The 2016 puzzle platformer videogame *Inside* by Playdead will be explored here in order to demonstrate the ways agency is distributed between the game's central text, subtexts, and physical interaction with the gaming hardware. Such

encounters, I will argue, see a coming-into-contact with the Unhuman. I will begin by outlining some of the key scholarship concerning agency as it is distributed between human and nonhuman actors. I align this with the article's approach to the unhuman. The unhuman, I want to suggest, is an underexplored facet of videogame subjectivities and the ethics of gameplay.

Figure 1 – Screenshot taken from *Inside* (Playdead, 2016). All figures included in this article are courtesy of Playdead.

The game *Inside*, released cross-platform by Playdead in 2016, is an eerie puzzle platformer which centres around a young boy who moves through a dark, unforgiving world of complex mind control systems and terrifying encounters with unsettling creatures. All of the subjectivities present within its world, including the boy, are constantly monitored by non-human entities: cameras, computer networks, and the game system itself. The visual design and aesthetics of the environments hint at the dark and eerie worlds the game represents: not only is the player given very little information about the storyline the game follows, but they are also given little sense of the central agents who are in control of the world depicted. As a puzzle platformer, the game intends for the player to make mistakes in order to solve the puzzles in the environment the next time around. Over the course of the game, the narrative implicates various subjectivities, and its puzzles evolve across various human labour practices. The puzzles within the game adjust with the type of environments represented: from rural fields and abandoned farm buildings towards desolate, Fordist in-

dustrial spaces (Figure 2). These include large factory buildings which house conveyor belts, levers, and creaking pipelines. Yet, it is also clear that *Inside* draws attention to the systems at play beyond the player's immediate perceptual experience. Within its temporal framework, *Inside* captures various mutations of the human subject over time, the societies of which they are part, and the technologies they interact with and become part of, marking a revelation of Unhuman agency. Elements of unhumanity reveal the more slippery and affective relationship the game initiates beyond the bounds of absolute player autonomy; there is simultaneously evoked a sense of control, but a control that is constantly pulled away by actors in the gameworld, and the gaming system.

Figure 2 – The boy explores a farm in *Inside* (Playdead, 2016)

My analysis of the game *Inside* will be informed by a new materialist perspective, a vantage from which player agency and its importance to fluid gameplay is disrupted through consideration of its complex affective tendencies. The multi-sensory nature of *Inside* has been explored in much of the writing and reviews of the game, particularly in the ways the audio tracks reveal elements of the narrative[1]. Yet, little has been done on the intricacies of the affectivity of the game, the kind of emergent feelings produced by its mechanics, and the ways its narrative truly unsettles player agency. Alternative logics and models of physics are revealed through strange experiments contained within the gameworld. There are human corpses tied to chords that float upwards underwater, and other gravitational forces which push rather than pull; such forces are replicated

1. See Mathew Arnold (2018). Inside the Loop: The Audio Functionality of Inside. *The Computer Games Journal, 7* (4). pp.203-211.

through subtle triggers that emerge out of the hand controller. In one section, the player must shelter the young boy from the deathly, rupturing force of a sonic boom experiment: should the boy come into contact with the vibrational force which is omitted from the mechanism, his body explodes and flies towards the screen in shards of flesh. This moment is affectively transient, mimicked by vibrational feedback in the controller, and unsettling sounds of rupturing flesh as it perceptually gets flung towards the player. An exploration of the new materialist framing of *intra*-action might more accurately capture the nuanced interplay of agencies beyond the player that are present both in the game's central plot, and its material interactions with the player. The formulation of intra-action emerges in the work of Karen Barad. Her investigation of cross-ontological agencies sees a decentring of the human subject. In her 2017 work *Meeting the Universe Half Way*, Barad reads the interactions between human and non-human agents through what she calls "agential realism". She defines this as:

> An epistemological-ontological-ethical framework that provides an understanding of the role of humans *and* nonhumans, material *and* discursive, and natural *and* cultural factors in scientific and other social-material practices, thereby moving such considerations beyond the well-worn debates that pit constructivism against realism, agency against structure, and idealism against materialism. Indeed, the new philosophical framework that I propose entails a rethinking of fundamental concepts that support such binary thinking, including the notions of matter, discourse, causality, agency, power, identity, embodiment, objectivity, space, and time. (Barad, 2007, p.32)

Barad's framework of agential realism analyses modes of agency which are spread amongst "intra-acting" actors. By this, Barad suggests that agency resides across matter, discourse, causality, power, identity, embodiment, objectivity, space and time— between both human and nonhuman actors. This reshapes the concept of agency within liberal humanist thinking as "the ability to act based solely upon one's own free will" (Tulloch, 2014, p.342). There is a focus in Barad's work on the act of 'becoming', as opposed to a fixed subject or object who acts on their own accord. She states that "matter is substance in its intra-active becoming—not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency" (Barad, p.151). The focus on matter enables new considerations of the possible expansions of agential enquiry; matter, as substance, is continually forming through the congealing of multiple agents. The game *Inside*, through its depicted tones and textures, places a strong emphasis on this congealing of agencies through various subjectivities in its world. I argue here that in the particular context of the game, this reveals the "unhuman" at its core. The game propels its player towards a rupturing of agency and embodiment. The *Inside* referred to in the game's title is potentially an outside: the revelation of subjectivities which exist on the edge of human phenomenology and cognition. *Inside* represents not

just the co-emergence of the human and nonhuman, but the production of an entirely new *unhuman subjectivity.* This videogame marks specific mutations of a specifically human subjectivity, and marks a shift in emphasis from human/player agency, towards a dynamic and intra-active network of agents.

POST/NON/UNHUMAN

The unhuman serves a particular purpose within the game *Inside,* in that it provides a framework of compromised agency which is central to the game's narrative. However, before venturing into the particularities of the unhuman in *Inside*, I want to establish where the figure of the unhuman draws on, and differs to, the more commonly found categories of the nonhuman and posthuman. The unhuman is yet to be rooted in games scholarship – and here I hope to unite the topics of unruly agency and affect through the horrific dimensions of *unhumanity.* The prevalence of the posthuman, and the field of posthumanities, indicates the desire of the humanities to challenge the centrality of a generalised human subjectivity in its enquiries. The posthuman/posthumanities push beyond common figurations of the human, considering underexplored objects, things, animals and oftentimes "othered" beings that extend critical enquiry beyond the humanist subject. In their introduction to the *Posthuman Glossary*, Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova offer rich insights into the capacity for the posthuman to "critique […] the humanist ideal of 'Man' as the universal representative of the human" (2018) and even to "contribute to and explode the concept of the human" (p.3). The posthuman also has its roots in cybernetic discourse (e.g. Hayles, 1999), marking the convergence of humanity and the machine. The nonhuman is somewhat concurrent to the aspirations of the posthumanities, given its capacity to open up considerations of things and beings which are not captured under the category of "human". Agency plays a pivotal role in scholarship on the nonhuman, in the ways that it opens up the ways we conceptualise agency as interconnected and dispersed, beheld by humans, objects and animals alike. The post and nonhuman are oftentimes associated with contemporary games studies, in the ways that they enable us to understand the rich systems that videogames enact. Daniel Muriel and Gary Crawford argue that "videogames help us to visualise the nature of agency in contemporary society as a posthuman, assembled, and relational process." (2018, pp.9-10). They suggest that the distributed agencies enacted by and through videogames enable an affective and embodied understanding of the ways objects, bodies and software peripherals all enact change. This approach is communal, yet the unhuman makes communality strange. The unhuman challenges the unity of things and rather asks where they pull apart.

The unhuman is an unruly being. It marks a brute, embodied materiality—a mutation, and an alienation of humanity away from itself. In a sense, the kinds of mutations captured through the figure of the unhuman mark a temporality *after* the human – where traces of the human subject are eerily present

on an elemental scale (for example, flesh), but mutate into new and unsettling subjectivities. Dylan Trigg's work on the unhuman places the figure specifically at the core of horror and emerging phenomenologies "in which the gaze of human subjectivity loses its privileged place" (2014, p.3). Trigg locates the unhuman at the cusp of traditional phenomenology, where new subjectivities emerge which challenge traditional notions of what it means to be human. In many ways, Trigg's formulation sees an embodied emergence of human and nonhuman agents commingled. Trigg states that the unhuman enacts:

> A collision of the human and non-humanity inhabiting the same body, with each aspect folding over into the other…The subject…is depersonalised through an exposure to the alienness of matter. What remains is materialised abjection. (pp.8-9).

It is here, I argue, that the strange, affective contours of the unhuman emerge. Marking a new subjectivity, the unhuman sees multiple agents *folding* into one another, an embodied being that marks the slippery and inarticulable enmeshings of human and nonhuman.

Within unhuman subjectivity lies a new focus on the weird contours of human embodiment, its messy articulations and limitations. I have argued elsewhere that the sensations of the loss of control during gameplay allows for the emergence of unhuman forces, where the player senses weird affections that manifest within their own bodies[2]. Dylan Trigg's particular emphasis on horror and the uncanny sees "alien material" as a central facet of coming-into-contact with the unhuman—where suddenly the body does something unanticipated that makes us acknowledge its messy materiality. This kind of sensation can emerge when game systems do something the player did not anticipate, where there is an incapacity to behold the agency to maintain full control over their own actions. The unhuman can be found when intra-actions follow a slippery and unanticipated connection between human (subject; player) and nonhuman (object; gaming system; material hardware).

Elsewhere, contemporary scholarship on the figure of the unhuman focuses centrally on its implications and articulations of agency, considering the challenges the unhuman poses to the more widely explored subjectivities in humanism and posthumanism. Daniel Cottom's *Unhuman Culture* argues that the unhuman is that which is "foreign to the definition of humanity" marking the "alienation of humanity from itself in the very act of positing itself" (2006, p.xi). For Cottom, the unhuman poses a definitional dilemma: it uproots the meaning of humanity and human subjectivity, alienating it from itself. Cottom argues that the unhuman challenges the idea that agency is, or ever was, distinctly human, stating:

> identity then would appear to be wrought by the impersonal agencies of economic, technological, political and ideological forces and structures. (p.x)

2. See Vicki Williams (2018). 'Frameless Fictions: Exploring the Compatibility of Virtual Reality and the Horror Genre'. *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media,* 30. https://refractory-journal.com/30-Williams.

These impersonal agencies mark the intra-active relations between human and nonhuman systems, the visible and invisible elements that structure experience. In *Human No More: Digital Subjectivities, Unhuman Subjects, and the End of Anthropology* (2012), Neil Whitehead and Michael Wesche link unhuman subjectivity directly to digital technologies and the ethical dilemmas attached to the ways they reconfigure what is human (p.11). Whitehead and Wesche look at the new forms of marginalisation and oppression created by technological monopolies, where digital connections produce new forms of sociality beyond traditional social formations.

'THE HUDDLE' AS CONGEALED UNHUMAN AGENCY

The unhuman subjectivities found within *Inside* mark fleshy and affectively disturbing subjects that cross into alien territories. The game, in many ways, attempts to mimic the affective coming-into-contact with the unhuman through a layered narrative which bleeds between representation and the player's material interactions with its world. This becomes central at the game's finale – where the sporadic allusions to unhumanity throughout the game congeal themselves into what Playdead label as 'the huddle'.[1] The huddle is an entity discovered by the central avatar of the young boy at the end of the game. In the words of the game designers, it is "a compound humanoid blob of muscle, fat, skin and bones" (GDC, 2018). Playdead note that they took inspiration from various phenomena including crowdsurfing, a cluster of individuals where hands share a common goal. Visually, the huddle looks like a huge compound of flesh comprised of human body parts that have been mingled together. The huddle, I argue, is unhuman precisely because it represents an alienation of humanity into materialised abjection; it is horrific, it is strangely affective, and it resists agency on the part of the player and the gameworld.

The huddle is initially encountered by the player upon locating a vat within a building comprising computer networking rooms and laboratories. Human figures in lab coats and business wear surround the vat, gazing in at the huddle (which remains hidden until the young boy gets sucked into the vat and swims towards it). This is the suggested *Inside* made evident in the games title – the centre of a vast corporate entity whose networks remain obfuscated throughout the game's entirety. The huddle is attached to a pumping mechanism within its enclosure, as if it is being used as some kind of energy source. This is the functioning source of the unhuman network at the heart of the game. The game implies that the huddle has been created by an underground establishment, in order to power the strange experimental puzzles the player participates in throughout the rest of the game. The experiments are predominantly focused around mind control – where the player encounters a number of animals, zombie-esque figures and technological entities which appear to be under the control of a powerful and dystopic hidden agency. Essentially, the game operates in a way that maps new revelations during its course, as opposed to giving

1. Playdead were unable to provide an image of 'The Huddle,' it being the 'secret' hidden at the end of the game. To find out more about 'The Huddle' and how it was made, please watch the video from the Game Developers Conference (GDC, 2018) 'Huddle up! Making the [SPOILER] of INSIDE.' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFkYjAKuUCE

any direct and directive diegetic information to the player through cut scenes and dialogue.

The huddle is the heart of a vast control network which dictates the behaviour of everything the player has witnessed throughout the game. Such a network, according to Alexander Galloway and Eugine Thacker's approach in *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (2007) can be read as an emergence of the unhuman through network control. The huddle necessarily represents an aggregate life form which sees agency extend beyond the human subject, and into a strange, visceral network of fleshy matter. Galloway and Thacker note that:

> Network control ceaselessly teases out elements of the unhuman within human-oriented networks. This is most easily discovered in the phenomenology of aggregations in everyday life: crowds on city streets or at concerts, distributed forms of protest, and more esoteric instances of flashmobs, smartmobs, critical massing, or swarms of UAVs. All are different kinds of aggregations, but they are united in their ability to underscore the unhuman aspects of human action. It is the unhuman swarm that emerges from the genetic unit. (p.41).

Through this approach to networks, the unhuman is revealed to be always-present, always potential, emerging at the point of new synergies that are impersonal and intersubjective. The swarm, as one unhuman unit, marks the dissolution of human subjectivity towards an aggregate phenomenology. The huddle is inspired by the unhuman swarm, in the way that it still maintains an elemental human feel, but produces an entirely new aggregate entity. Galloway and Thacker argue that unhuman figurations capture the "tension between unitary aggregation and anonymous distribution, between the intentionality and agency of individuals and groups on the one hand, and the uncanny, unhuman intentionality of the network as an 'abstract whole'" (p.155). *The Exploit* sees the unhuman as a marker of the underlying agency of networks that monitor and control human subjects. This analysis of networks reveals the nonhuman elements that form our understandings of human subjectivity, as it is (re)produced through digital technologies in the form of bits and atoms. The unhuman reveals and breaks down the valorisation of the human subject as absolute agent, and allows access to otherwise hidden agencies which emerge alongside human action on both individual and collective levels. Where Galloway and Thacker maintain focus on human-oriented networks, the network present within *Inside* fundamentally circulates dystopic mind control functions that produce its specific forms of unhuman agency.

The ethical dimensions of the unhuman are arguably the central force within *Inside*: players of the game are forced to consider the world's underlying systems, the ways that the technologies present within its world reconfigure the human subject, and the inherent implications of these reconfigurations. The huddle is the subjectivity which powers the network it is controlled by.

Enclosed within a gigantic vat, attached to a large mechanical chord, it appears that brute matter is the central energy source to the intricate systems embedded within the world. Viewed in this way, the world of *Inside* can be seen as one giant network-body. Its entanglements of wires, generators, and complex mechanisms all link back to the huddle. The huddle is the brain at the core of the system that it is being manipulated by. The boy is absorbed into its mass of flesh – at which point the player moves through the world as the huddle. As the boy becomes part of its "beastly body"[3], it breaks out of its glass cage; the humans that surround it run in fear. It is here that a change of agency is marked by the bodily rhetorics of the huddle, where the player must control the disorientating and unbalanced mound of flesh as it crashes through glass and squeezes through small doorways. The huddle utters eerie moaning sounds as it moves, replicating the sound of deep, distorted human groaning, which indicates a conflicting sense of pain from something that was once human, but is no longer. The affective tie the player has with the huddle is marked by a fluid and unstable link between the actions they take on the control pad, the feedback sent through the hand controller, and the movement of the huddle on the screen. There are kinds of subtlety involved that the player must learn in order to balance its unhuman fleshy substance as it crashes through the gameworld. Though the player now controls the mass of flesh, there is a sense that its agency remains somewhat untethered. The game challenges the ethics of completing its puzzles as a means to its players achieving satisfaction. Rather, it makes the player consider the ways they are implicated, and what role they have played in the events that unfold having participated in its world. The unhuman networks mask the hidden agents at the game's core. Though the huddle is horrific and yields its own agency, it is seemingly bound by the creation of a vast corporate entity that engineers mind control systems in order to produce obedient subjects.

The game's aesthetic design depicts all of its human characters as abstract and faceless. There is no capacity for human emotion to be rendered visible; instead, the game places focus on sound and movement to relay emotional cues to the player, and influence them to action. The avatar that the player controls from the start of the game is perceivably human: a young boy wearing a red jumper who begins by tumbling from out of shot into a rain-sodden field. Though the boy is faceless, his bodily rhetorics – i.e. the manner in which he moves – relays useful information to the player. For example, when the boy is in danger, he will begin to sprint hectically and his breathing becomes heavy and panicked. Such actions are motivated by signifiers in the gamespace, including other people, animals, and objects which pursue him. This is initially learnt by the player in its opening scene as he is approached by other 'human' actors. Within the eerie, dark landscape of a wet field, a set of car headlights emerge out of the foggy backdrop and two men exit the vehicle. Without any action on the part of the player, the boy looks towards the car and begins to breathe heavily. When the player urges the young boy forward, his movement transitions from measured

3. Rob Gallagher coins the phrase "beastly bodies" in his *Videogames, Identity and Digital Subjectivity*. Gallagher uses this as a framework for capturing the ways bodies are subject to "beastly drives, temptations, and losses of agency" (p.103) during gameplay.

jogging towards a panicked sprint. The men then ran towards the young boy, and the player must tackle a number of obstacles to avoid being captured by the men; if he is captured, the boy is killed. This is something the player only learns if they do not manage to escape the first time round. All of the boy's movements relay subtle feedback through the hand controller, and this alters according to the kinds of environment he moves through. The camera's pans, framing and angles are predominantly fixed, save for some parallax elements, yet at key points the vista shots zoom in and out in order to reveal visual cues that aid the player; these cues, along with other audio-information, reveal subtle hints of how the player should respond in certain situations. The player, throughout most of the game, is forced to imagine the game's plot, as no direct information is given to them about the wider narrative premise. The player feels a sense of responsibility toward the boy, but has little control over the wider structures – why he must survive, where he is going, and for what purpose. There is a sense of evolution within the objects the boy can interact with as the player progresses throughout the game, all of which hint at various "bodily rhetorics" associated with traditional working models. I am taking bodily rhetorics here from the work of Michel Foucault (1975), which captures the ways subjects move, the gestures they make, and the efficiency through which they respond to institutional order. There is a sense that *Inside* draws attention towards the bodily attunement of the young boy in various institutional environments, which

Figure 3 – As the player pushes forward, the running boy gains momentum in *Inside*.

constantly and consistently shifts as the game progresses. Where the beginning of the game is primarily located outside in rural, farming landscapes, the end of the game marks an absolute rupturing of bodily subjectivity into the unknown and eerie rhetorics of the Unhuman huddle.

The agency communicated to the player through the young boy differs from that of the huddle, in that it feels *slippery* to control: the huddle is a subjectivity which escapes and exceeds the human player's grasp. By 'slippery', I not only allude to the huddle's fluid mechanics and movement through the gameworld, but the replication of its affective surfaces via the player's embodied interaction with it. For example, though the player pushes the huddle forwards, it moves with its own fluid and unhuman momentum (Figure 3). Its limbs stretch out in various directions, it stumbles, condenses and expands its own fleshy substance. The affective sensations of moving the huddle replicate the eerie organicity of its bodily parts. This affective modality of interacting with a videogame marks the medium's capacities to attend to realms beyond the human, producing new agencies which escape and exceed human grasp. This sense of the ungraspability does not necessarily reference a literal holding onto something like a hand-controller, it allows for a reconsideration of valorised player control as the central means for progression through a gameworld.

AGENCY, GAME AESTHETICS AND WEIRD AFFECT

Inside resists the use of representations of emotion to convey information to its players, instead programming affective cues to prompt player action. The game requires that the player has an embodied relationship with the gamespace: as Aubrey Anable notes, the feel of a game "is directly linked to the affective circuits that touching opens up between representation, screens, code, and bodies" (2018, p.37). The game's affective dimensions enable the player to gain some insights into the idea that the young boy is being hunted down by some kind of anonymous institution. Given the lack of intradiegetic information relayed at the beginning, there is no emotional attachment – but certainly an affective one.

Videogames act as unique mediums for eliciting specific forms of affect. The capacity for players to be touched by videogames has been explored by a range of scholars (Ash 2013; Shinkle 2005; Anable 2018) all of whom consider the contact produced between the body, representation on screen, gaming narratives, software, and hardware. James Ash (2013) argues that affect can be aligned with the ways players become somatically attuned to the medium, incorporating gaming hardware as part of their apparatus in order to achieve desired actions within the gameworld. Ash notes that specific design elements negotiate the "affective and emotional engagement" players have with games (p.28). Eugénie Shinkle pushes beyond the capacity for game design to mediate affect, arguing that players "possess *subrational* agency" which enables lateral and unpredictable responses to perceived environments. Shinkle argues that "games actualise affect in ways that designers (whatever their motives) do not

always anticipate." (p.6). Aubrey Anable (2018) notes that affect can be read as a specific orientation towards representations, arguing that game studies has seen a shift away from emergent gameplay, towards emergent feelings. Anable reads videogames as mediums which enact "specific affective dimensions, legible in their images, algorithms, temporalities, and narratives" (2018, p.7). Across the spectrum of approaches aligning videogames with affect theory is a questioning of the ontological boundaries between players, programming, representation and material hardware. Whether intentional (attunement; incorporation) or unintentional (subrational response), our affective responses to videogames necessarily implicate various human and nonhuman agents.

For the sake of this article, it is necessary to consider the ways in which games might *complicate* attunement and incorporation, in the ways that they produce sensations for the player of not quite being in control. Some games produce unique affects when agency is, or feels like it has been, stripped away from the player; this can be both embedded in its programming, or occur through emergent play. Horror games, in particular, are notoriously sites for experiencing compromised agency. Tanya Kryzwinska notes that the dynamics of being in and out of control in horror games see the emergence of affective attributes that "link deep to the structure of games, provided by their programming" (Kryzwinska, 2002). Toying with agency is particularly relevant to videogames, in the ways that agency can be pulled between multiple actors including player, hardware, narrative, and code. However, the particularly strange, embodied affects produced by compromised agency in games remains underexplored. When games pull between an ontological here and there, this can leave the player feeling uneasy—it can evoke strange satisfaction and unanticipated thrills. Weird affects seep out of the programmable corners of videogames: they are not necessarily predictable for players when they participate in their virtual worlds. Videogames have the unique potential to make us *feel weird*. This could, for example, occur when a game glitches, momentarily resisting both the control of the player, and also its embedded programs and control systems. Games become weird sites when they do something that neither player nor programmer could predict. They can also make their players feel strange through their unique aesthetic and representational capacities. Videogames have always allowed for the depiction of unsettling and inarticulable subjectivities that operate via logics that are beyond the quotidian lifeworld – namely, alternative worlds that give rise to new beings which go beyond the human subject. In the case of *Inside*, I argue, weird affects emerge through the game's depictions of unhuman subjectivities which are inherently strange and unsettling.

MIND CONTROL

After considering the unhuman in relation to its affective contours, I want to turn specifically to the circulation of unhuman elements in the game via its hidden mind control networks. Here, I argue that the diegetic representa-

tions of agency pour out of the gameworld, and are mirrored by the player's own relationship with the avatar's they control. The parasitic entanglements of agency overtly represented in the game bleed out of, and slip beyond the plot, as they simultaneously frame the relation between avatar and player. The mind control structure is first hinted at earlier in the game, when the player moves the young boy through a field full of scattered pig corpses. All of the corpses are being consumed by small parasitic worms. Moving past the heap, a living pig charges towards the boy; if the player does not steer clear of its path, the boy gets trampled by it. The pig groans uncomfortably as it moves, and follows the young boy in whichever direction the player moves him. Upon closer inspection, it appears that a worm is attached to the pigs head. The animals are being controlled by some kind of genetically modified creature that dictates that they too must try to sabotage the boy as he gets closer to the game's *Inside.* Such parasitic elements of *Inside* have been discussed by Andrew Bailey in his paper 'Authority of the Worm: Examining Parasitism Within *Inside* and *Upstream Colour*' (2018). Bailey notes that parasitism "functions as a tool for the boy to make subversive use of the same systems that are being used to take control of his world" (p.49). There is a multidimensional agential problem at the core of the game, where the player must manipulate the boy to progress, whilst the boy enacts manipulation onto a number of figures within the game. In the early stages of the game, such agency follows the rules of bodily rhetorics that function on

Figure 4 – Screenshot from *Inside* (Playdead, 2013) in which the boy is monitored thorough a surveillance system.

a primarily instinctual level – where there emerges a threat, run or hide from it. The boy's movement is fairly self-explanatory to begin with, and the player must simply follow the multisensory cues provided within the environment in order to solve the puzzles. Yet these puzzles become more and more complex, as the dimensions of the networks in the game reveal themselves.

As the player navigates through various spaces, the camera pans in and out to reveal backdrops in the distance of masses of drone-like human bodies, marching outside the buildings. The player gains brief visual insights through small crevices and windows of the lines of unhuman bodies, moving in perfect synchronicity towards an unknown location. Not dissimilarly to the mind-controlled pigs earlier in the game, these figures move as if they are being controlled by something. They ignite unsettling feelings during gameplay, because the player has very little sense of who or what these figures are, and who they are being controlled by. Clambering across rooftops and sliding down pipelines, the young boy eventually falls through a gap in the roof, and stumbles into a line of the drone bodies as they drudge forward through a space where they are monitored by multiple surveillance cameras and figures wearing lab coats. These drone-like bodies lack any kind of humanity, beyond their being human bodies. Their bodily movement differs, for example, from those they are being monitored by: animate human-beings, with lifelike qualities who are wearing smart business attire and lab coats. As they stand taking notes, below the overbearing gaze of an inscrutable surveillance camera, the player must learn to adjust to the rhythm of the figures, moving perfectly in time with them (Figure 4). If they fail to do so, a claw emerges from the surveillance camera, dragging the boy out of line and presumably to his death. The player, in other words, must adapt the boy's bodily rhetoric within the game to the rhythm and motion of the unhuman figures it portrays. The player must affectively respond to the intense situation they are thrown into, and learn as they go along. Any action that occurs outside of the synchronous rhythm of the system warrants death, and the puzzle restarts. Such unhuman bodily rhetorics mark the emergence of the unhuman subject under "the individualising fragmentation of labour power" (Foucault, p.148) within the gameworld; each body becomes a unit that is monitored under the premise of a kind of lifelessness. Any hint at "humanity" or messy movement results in a removal of the body. The line, then, marks the surveillance of efficiency under the unknown institutional order that characterises the core of the game's narrative system. As such, affective embodiment is seemingly eradicated, a shift towards a "bodiless reality" (Foucault, p.148) where movement is dictated by the narrative's central political machine. The unhuman presented here manifests a bodily docility. This, in and of itself, marks an uncomfortably affective player experience: the strange movement of the docile unhuman bodies is tense and unsettling. Yet the player must adjust their control accordingly in order to fit this unhuman mould.

As the game progresses further towards the Inside the game's title alludes to, it becomes more evident that these unhuman figures are being controlled by an ominous and parasitic mind control system. There are increasingly frequent encounters where it is evident that more "human" bodies are surveilling and monitoring the "unhuman" bodies, and this is primarily revealed by the bodily rhetorics each of the bodies enact. The unhuman bodies slouch and stumble forward, their faces not even looking in the direction they are walking. They seemingly resemble the undead, the zombie – a kind of regurgitated stumble. They represent a compromised form of (un)humanity that is produced in order to fulfil a system functionality, created in order to be completely unconscious and docile.

DISCOVERING SUBTEXTS: FURTHER DIMENSIONS FOR AGENTIAL AND ETHICAL ENQUIRY?

Within all the strange and disorienting puzzles that the player must solve, there remains a slippery sense of agency that ties to the ethics of play; that is to say that the player has to use the docile unhuman bodies depicted in order to solve the puzzles and move onto the next stages. Despite the fact that there is an ominous control system at play, the player themselves participates in this control system by utilising their own agency over the unhuman figures whose agency is being compromised. In one particular section of the game, the boy moves through an abandoned mining shaft, and is followed by unhuman miners who seem to be drawn to him. The player must escort the miners through the shaft, using them as material mass to trigger a platform that unlocks the door to exit. When the player has recruited 20 miners, all of whom follow the young boy in whichever direction he moves, the entrance into the next part of the game unlocks. Whilst the miners remain in stasis on the platform, the boy runs towards the exit, leaving them abandoned in the bleak underground space. The game often sheds light on the injustices of its own mechanics, where the player must participate in the abhorrent system the game portrays, and the subjection of bodies that are neither living nor dead is the central concern of its narrative.

Adding further dimensionality to the intra-active agencies depicted in its world, should players participate in its hidden and sedimented subtext, *Inside* goes further to suggest that the young protagonist might be unhuman, too. Though the boy participates in the manipulation of other bodies in order to progress, the game implies that the same manipulative tendencies are built into the player's own control over the avatar protagonist. A number of yellow wires are seen during certain parts of the game. Should the player follow them to their source, straying off the path toward completion, they come to small generators that the boy is able to unplug. When unplugging the generators, they spark and force the boy to retreat backwards. Such an act is made to feel as though it is a form of resistance, not just in the way it appears to be a breakage of the diegetic network, but also in that it requires player to venture away from the intuitive paths presented. All of the generators are hidden away in nooks and crannies that veer

away from the central path towards the game's inside. This oftentimes requires that the player simply see if turning around or jumping through small enclaves will allow them to gain access to hidden areas. If the player manages to locate all of these hidden generators and unplug them all, the player can then load and return to one of the earliest scenes in the game where the boy runs through a wheat field. Hidden amongst the high grass lies the entry to an underground hideaway. The player can embark down a step ladder within the opening and find themselves in an abandoned bunker. If the player wanders through the space, they locate a pad; opening the door leads onto an extensive tunnel where a central power source can be located. Seen within the background is a large mind control helmet that is infiltrated with wires. When the player unplugs this final power source, the mind control device in the background explodes. At the same time, the boy's body slowly slumps forwards as if he too has been unplugged – and the game ends. This alternative ending adds even further dimensions to the agencies implicated in the game: either the power prevents the player from controlling the boy any longer, or the actions the boy takes might have been dictated by another unknown agent the entire time. This would imply that the boy might have actually been the central unhuman subject of the game from the outset. The implication that the boy is also being controlled inadvertently implicates the player in the game's dystopian network of actors. The games layers unfold outwards; though the game purposefully leaves many questions unanswered, the player is revealed to be the hidden force behind the wired systems and networks at play.

Inside has the unique capacity to make us feel unhuman not just through its representation of unhuman subjectivities, but through our being part of its morbid, unhuman system. Every seemingly resistant act or attempt to break or reveal the hidden networks within its world only leads the player to feel responsible for the cruel fate of other subjects. Even having reached the game's *Inside* and solving puzzles in order to break the huddle out of the eerie buildings and infrastructures, leads to a dead end. The game ends with the huddle rolling out onto a beach, where its grotesque flesh lays bare against the moonlight. Momentum is halted, and the credits roll, leaving no sense of whether the player's actions led to any retribution. Though this might seem to be an almost disappointing ending, *Inside* asks for a shift of focus – away from the sense of fulfilment achieved through progress and 'doing well' in a game, rather towards the feelings gameworlds are able to produce. Feelings move from fear to frustration, monotony to excitement, simplicity to impossibility, fulfilment and emptiness. Though all games necessarily implicate some of these feelings, *Inside* asks of its players to truly acknowledge how it feels to be played. This is supported by the strange intra-actions between its components: the vibrational feedback emitted by the hand controller, the unsettling mechanical sounds embedded in its settings, or the splatting of the huddle as it crashes from tall heights. Here, I have argued that *Inside* initiates a truly affective and interactive mode of unhuman agency. As a congealed body of human and nonhuman actors, the unhu-

man is revealed both literally (via the subjectivity of 'the huddle') and subtly through the interrelations of player, narrative and gaming system. The game asks its players to ask questions, to be unknowing, and embrace a world that constantly toys with their ability to behold full agential grasp.

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LUDOGRAPHY

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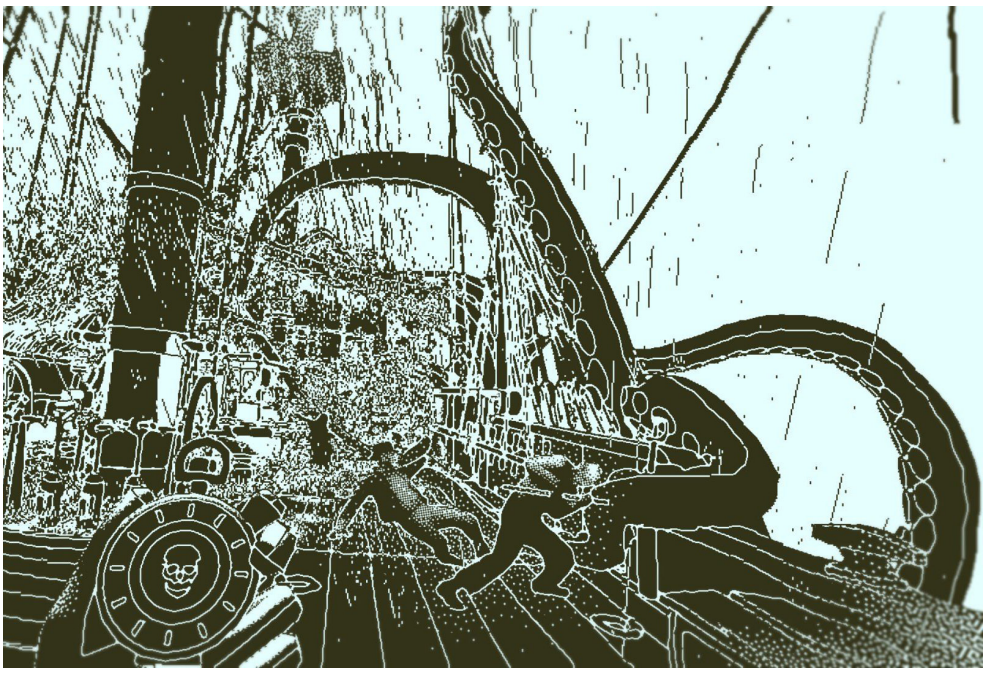
CONOR MCKEOWN
King's College London
conor.mckeown@kcl.ac.uk

"You bastards may take exactly what I give you"

Exploring Agential Realism as the Basis of a Novel Theory of Agency through *Return of the Obra Dinn*



Screenshot of *Return to the Obra Dinn* (Lucas Pope, 2018)

ABSTRACT

In this paper, l propose an addition to the existing writing on agency within digital game studies (including but not limited to Murray, 1997; Bogost, 2006; Wardrip-Fruin et al., 2009; Aarseth, 2012), arguing for a recognition of a form of agency in games best understood through the lens of Karen Barad's writings on agential realism. To highlight how this 'intra-active' perspective significantly diverges from and disrupts current concepts of agency, I present a reading of Lucas Pope's *Return of the Obra Dinn* (2018), a game that highlights how several key elements of Barad's novel formulation of agency can greatly benefit the study of

digital games. I highlight how, through a balance of design and narrative craft, *Obra Dinn* eschews the trend for defining agency as relative to the breadth of potential player actions (Murray, 1997) – or else the extent to which a computer can support the illusion of a potential for action (Wardrip-Fruin et al., 2009) – in favour of providing players with something simultaneously more mundane and yet existentially profound. In playing this game, an agential-realist reading suggests, players are caught up in the becoming of many things: the becoming of the game but also of elements of themselves. Indeed, Janik (2017) has concisely outlined the importance of Barad's work for understanding the production of the player through play. However, in this paper, I seek to further that idea (and several other applications of Barad's work to the study of games) and contend that an intra-active understanding of play necessitates the understanding of a continued materialisation beyond the player. Embracing an intra-active view of agency when reading *Obra Dinn*, the seemingly banal task players are set – of completing an insurance claim for the 19th century East India Company – is recast as a meaningful facet of the production of spacetime, humanist narratives and ongoing history. Although this may sound grandiose, an essential element of the impact of *Obra Dinn*, is the player being cast in the role of an observer, rather than an instigator of action: players are not given the power to shape reality but are instead asked to see themselves and their actions as a powerless but essential part of wider phenomena. Bringing this novel theory of agency to bear on *Obra Dinn* player actions are refigured as entangled in the production of the meaningful materiality of a heightened fiction on the high-seas and a Lovecraftian unreality. Yet, ultimately, these players/their play is also intricately entangled into the enduring legacy of the racial tensions of British colonialism.

KEYWORDS: *agency, agential-realism, Obra Dinn, Lucas Pope, Karen Barad*

INTRODUCTION

A trend is emerging within game studies. Amidst a backdrop of materialist engagements that seek to decentralise and query the anthropocentric dimensions of the field (Keogh, 2018; Leorke & Wood, 2019), several scholars look to Karen Barad's agential-realism (Janik, 2017; Wilde & Evans, 2017; Chang, 2017; Stone, 2018; McKeown, 2019) for a theoretical frame to ground their various explorations of the medium. One possible reason for this emerging trend may be the potential for Barad's work to enable novel concepts of – among other things – interaction and agency. Though I will provide a more detailed explanation of this later in the paper, Barad's work questions the fundamental metaphysics of much of Western philosophy. In this, it unveils a radical reframing of agency as a co-constitutional force both preceding and productive of (only ever "apparent") things. This new ontology (or "onto-ethico-epistemology" in Barad's words) comes with an explicit moral imperative: if all things are

understood as entangled, actions become equally entangled. Consequently, this shared agency produces a shared responsibility in the production of an entangled history. In this paper, I will outline a selection of existing writing on agency within digital game studies, highlighting how Barad's theory of agency diverges from and disrupts current concepts. To make clear exactly how Barad's work could impact game studies, I provide an agential-realist reading of a game that highlights several elements of this novel concept of agency as I have understood it. I highlight how Lucas Pope's *Return of the Obra Dinn* (2018), through a skilful blending of mechanic design and narrative craft, eschews the trend of placing immediate importance on player actions in favour of providing players with an experience that is simultaneously functionally limited yet, when read intra-actively, existentially grand. Through the player's mundane activity in a fictional, fantastical setting, action comes to produce matter but also meaning in such a way that the seemingly banal central action – completing an insurance claim for the 19th century East India Company – comes to transform time and space. Essential to the impact of *Obra Dinn*, however, is that the player is not cast as the instigator of these actions, but rather, as an observer.

In this paper, I argue that *Obra Dinn* presents players with a decentralised or intra-active form of agency that reveals the enduring power of small actions when understood as part of a chain of events extending throughout history and space. Actions, it shows, are not meaningful for their ability to shape reality – as conventional game studies writings on agency would lead us to believe – but meaningful in their ability to play a co-constitutive role in producing reality. The seemingly simple actions players can take are recontextualised as simultaneously produced by and as small parts of an intricate phenomenal assemblage. Pushing our theoretical understanding of agency within game studies to its limits, we can understand this more distributed form of agency (or intra-activity) as entangled in the production of many (apparent) things. Although Janik has argued that intra-active understandings of play can be seen as giving rise to player themselves (Janik, 2017) I argue for that in *Obra Dinn* we can see the potential for agency in a digital game as a force entangled in the production of multiple other apparent things: firstly, a heightened interpersonal drama on the high-seas; secondly, a Lovecraftian unreality, and ultimately, an intricately interwoven entanglement of physical *matter* of player actions and computational processing, with the so-called *meaning* or socio-cultural legacy of the racial tensions of British colonialism.

DEFINING AGENCY

Within digital game studies, scholars are fortunate to enjoy a wide range of definitions of agency. So many, in fact, that though I will attempt to discuss a range of these theories within this paper, there are many more that I could not discuss for the sake of brevity. That being said, the discussion around agency in game studies can broadly be traced to Janet Murray's clear and unambiguous definition

of agency as: "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (2016, p. 126). Murray's idea of agency should sound familiar to students of either literature studies or much of humanist philosophy, wherein the ability of either a fictional character or a living human to express complex and wilful actions stands as a steadfast defence against, on the one hand, poor, plot-driven writing and a deterministic universe on the other.

Murray discusses a range of examples of what meaningful agency might be, beginning small with the simple task of opening documents on a computer: users trust that their actions will elicit uncomplicated and reliable results. However, it is not long before Murray draws on media such as Greek theatre and cinema, contending that it is a necessity for there to be dramatic stakes within gaming if they are to be seen as a new narrative medium. Dreaming of what potential agency-driven heights (driven by the context of previous narrative forms) might be possible within a digital narrative, contrasting multilinear digital narratives against those with only one outcome, Murray writes, "the desire for agency in digital environments makes us impatient when our options are so limited. We want an open road with wide latitude to explore and more than one way to get somewhere" (p. 126). In this, Murray separates the notions of interactivity and agency. Though we might accept that using a word processor is interactive, we can equally accept Dr Zhivago as a character with agency as he is, relatively speaking, free to act and those actions have obvious consequences. At the same time, Murray breaks agency itself into distinct levels. She writes, "some games, like chess, can have relatively few or infrequent actions but a high degree of agency, since the actions are highly autonomous, selected from a large range of possible choices, and wholly determine the course of the game" (p. 127). Following this logic, agency is something that a game can have in greater or lesser quantities. It is not just the frequency of action, but the autonomy afforded by action, the range of possibilities for acting and the impacts upon the course of the game that actions have that characterise the degree of agency. As such, although opening a document on a computer is an interaction, or possibly even an expression of agency, that agency is limited. A fully realised virtual world in which players could do anything they like would provide much greater agency.

It's worth noting that Murray does not argue that a fully realised virtual world exists; rather, she imagines, inspired by popular science fiction, a 'holodeck' in which a user's every desire can be realised. This concept of agency as contingent upon what can be supported by the computer system is what I will be arguing against in this paper – instead of holding up agency as a possibility that has not been and may never be realised I believe that we can rather seek to use the concept and its reverberations within digital games to better understand the implications of actions.

Murray's concept of agency is echoed throughout a host of associated scholarship: Espen Aarseth implies that agency is a quality that correlates in vari-

ous ways to the construction of the game world, objects in that world, characters and the extent to which events in the game are either scripted or open to change (Aarseth, 2012). Writing specifically on how the objects in a game world imbue players with agency, he writes, "[objects] are important because they determine the degree of player agency in the game: a game which allows great player freedom in creating or modifying objects will at the same time not be able to afford strong narrative control" (p. 8). Aarseth's formulation of agency is not so different to Murray's, given its emphasis on player freedom and choice. Though the emphasis for Aarseth is on agency through game design rather than through the satisfaction of player desires or narrative excellence, these points – Murray's key points for agency – are also factored into his attempt to tabulate the potential for agency, using a taxonomical grid system of agency-fostering elements. For Aarseth, as Murray, a game is a more highly 'agential' (that is to say, more imbued with agency) experience, the more the player has the ability to – or, through good design, believes they have the ability to – affect changes within the game world, at the level of play or narrative or both. This notion that agency is ultimately manifest within the ability to instigate change is visible in several other author's work, such as in Jaime Banks (2015) who suggests that players can find forms of agency in games through the avatars they use, inhabit, create or become. Although the focus is shifted once again, away from narrative or ludic practices and towards character, the emphasis remains on the experience of the player.

In contrast Murray and Aarseth then, Wardrip-Fruin et al (2009) directly question commonplace assumptions of agency, contending that "agency is not simply 'free will' or 'being able to do anything.' It is interacting with a system that suggests possibilities through the representation of a fictional world and the presentation of a set of materials for action" (p. 7). Wardrip-Fruin et al draw attention to the relationship between player and machine in generating agency, considering player desires, dramatic probabilities and the ability to create satisfactory improvisational experiences. In other words, a game is not at the most agential when it allows the player to do exactly as they would like; rather, a game is at its most agential when a fine balance is struck between the game's narrative, player expectations and the underlying computer system (among other things) enabling players to improvise the solution between their intended course of action to a backup course of action without too radically contradicting the internal fictions or revealing the underlying computation. Similarly, Ian Bogost's idea of possibility spaces (Bogost, 2006, p. 69), it should be noted, focuses on actions as a result of restriction, with agency emerging from these restrictions in a manner strongly evocative of something like a reverse formulation of Gibsonian affordances. At the same time, 'inter-reactivity' in which both player and computer engage in mutual 'reactions' instead of a process of interaction (Smethurst & Craps, 2014) is also similar to and, arguably, an extension of Wardrip-Fruin et al's work.

The explicitly 'phenomenal', in that Wardrip-Fruin et al identify agency as a phenomenon rather than an outcome of action, conception of agency is, to my mind, a step in the right direction for game studies. Throughout their paper, the almost posthuman acknowledgement of the role of the computer within the act of digital game play is also laudable. However, I want to suggest that this notion of agency, though seemingly distinct from just being the enacted will of the player, is nevertheless grounded in a traditional conception of the term; it does not break far enough away from the orthodox. For instance, the authors praise *Far Cry 2* (2008), a first-person shooter game in which the player is able to plan actions before attempting to realise those actions. Should the player's intentions go awry, through the use of a 'buddy-system' in which a non-player controlled character can rescue the player if in dire need, the player is able to seamlessly survive bungled combat, return to a short planning phase and try to execute a newly improvised plan based on a new situation, without having to be explicitly told that they have failed – i.e. through a 'game over screen' or 'lost life' (p. 7). This formulation of agency as a sufficiently competently programmed computer system (admittedly, no small task) and the presentation of materials for action is troubling; it suggests that agency is predominantly the ability of the designers of a computer system, and the hardware/software assemblage that eventually executes that design, to fool a human player into feeling sufficiently satisfied by their actions. Given the rich history of agency as a philosophical and social concept, this seems a rather shallow definition for the term, even within the scope of digital games. Wardrip-Fruin et al seem somewhat aware of this, given their clarification that although their approach could be viewed as derivative of Latour's 'actor network theory', it is not, due to the distinct form of agency found in "fictional microworlds of games and other forms of playable media" (p. 8).

Wardrip-Fruin et al seek to assign the title of agency to what amounts to human input of variables into a looping digital system. One author at least has very recently taken up the task of challenging this system-centric vision of agency in digital games. Sarah Stang, writing in contrast to Murray's framing of agency, but equally aware of Wardrip-Fruin's formulation, contends that expressions of agency *within* a digital game can only ever be illusory (Stang, 2019). Stang argues that a true form of agency (or interactivity) is possible, however, and can be expressed by players engaging in discourse outside or beyond the game, such as with developers. In this way, players extend the reach of their actions beyond the scope of the game's internal systems. Examples of this are evident such as when fans of a series use social media to influence developers into changing the narrative (as was the case in the *Mass Effect* series). While this is potentially problematic, not least because of the, possibly unintentional, rebirth of formalist authorial authority it implies, it nonetheless takes to task the notion that game scholars should be content with understanding agency as the expression of human-computer collaboration alone.

For my ends, both Wardrip-Fruin et al's framing of agency and Stang's rejection of it simply asks too little of digital games. In this paper I make the argument that – at the very least – an element of agency within the study of digital games should be the understanding that player actions are existential in nature; that player actions play a role in the co-constitutive existence of things. Agency, I will contend, should not be measured solely on the player's satisfaction with the computer system's upholding of the ludic/digital/narrative illusion, nor with the creators' ability to effectively harness social media. Instead, the limits of agency should be understood as shaped by the extent to which player actions come to imbue matter with meaning, both within the game world and beyond. Admittedly there are few games that achieve this lofty height, but there are some and one, as I will explain below, is *Return of the Obra Dinn*. However, it is first essential to unpack exactly what it is I mean by imbuing matter with meaning.

AGENTIAL-REALISM AND AGENCY IN GAMES

Karen Barad writes of the "ongoing flow of agency" as both *preceding* and being *productive* of things; agency is the process "through which part of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another part of the world and through which causal structures are stabilized and destabilized" (2007, p. 140). Perhaps most importantly, agency, "does not take place in space and time but happens in the making of spacetime itself" (2007, p. 140). Following Barad, it's possible to adopt an understanding of agency as something other than the physical or social expression of a material being's will; rather, agency can be understood as a decentralised phenomenon indicative of a wide array of forces producing the apparent materiality, and – where phenomenally possible – internal experience of subjects and object simultaneously. Though a concise account of Barad's entire philosophy may not be possible here, it is helpful to see it as an alternative metaphysics, contrary to the subject-object dualism and representationalism common to Western philosophy. To Barad "we are of the universe – there is no inside, no outside. There is only intra-acting from within and as part of the world in its becoming" (2007).

As mentioned, the last few years has seen a handful of game studies scholars turn to Karen Barad's agential-realism for a philosophical framework. Applying Barad's decentralised notion of agency to digital game studies is an alluring possibility with the potential to disrupt conceptions of human players, fictional characters and the act of play itself. If we are not bound to seeing agency as actions and their implications but can instead embrace agency as the quality that enables the passing existence of things, a meaningful shift would occur in what game scholars consider an agential experience. Rather than placing an emphasis on what actions a game would allow a player to do, we could focus instead on what level of existence a game can allow a player to facilitate.

Janik rather masterfully summates Barad's position regarding agency in classic game studies' understandings, writing, "this also changes the status of agency, which is not something that actants have and can use, but rather

a dynamic force that happens between them" (2017, p. 4). Janik writes, "In Barad's ontoepistemological agential realism, intra-actions replace interaction, because there are no determined, independent entities preceding relations" (p. 4). What's more, she stresses that "analysing the video game within this framework helps us understand how the game object and the player not only influence each other, but become partners in creating meanings" (p.7). Beyond this, Janik makes clear that there is much further to go in pushing just how disruptive to established thinking within both game studies and game design intra-activity and agential realism can be. By focusing on intra- rather than inter-actions, scholars "are not only creating analytic tools to better understand the relation between the player and the game object, [they] are also shifting our perception about play" (p. 7). I too desire to take up this disruptive stance; instead of suggesting that Barad's work can be harmoniously integrated into game studies, I want to highlight the disruptive nature of Barad's work as a basis for a philosophy of agency in narrative videogames.

Building on the good 'Baradian' work that has occurred to date within game studies, there is an aspect of Barad's philosophy that is not currently common within writing on games: the explicit ethical and political dimension therein. While it is tempting to draw solely on the elements of their work querying concepts familiar to games and gaming (actants, agency) there is the possibility of something more rewarding that can come from attempting to carry over this social and political aspect as well. To Barad "we are of the universe – there is no inside, no outside. There is only intra-acting from within and as part of the world in its becoming" (2007, p. 396). Yet, contingent on this, agency is not just a question of being co-constitutively produced from the material universe; rather, it is the understanding that this universality brings with it an explicit responsibility to the world of which you are produced. If one rejects the existence of things as independent of, or 'in' the universe, it follows that one must assume that being 'of' the universe results in a constant, material – though perhaps imperceptible – impact upon that universe of which we are 'of'.

An important final element of intra-active agency then, is the continued and active process with moral and ethical concerns. In Barad's work, this process condenses materiality across vastly different scales along with the properties of materiality – the space and time it produces – into an entangled state where the microscopic, the personal, the universal, the past, present and future cease to be inert but rather become active political agents in subjective, social, national matters of life, death and everything in between. For instance, writing about the assemblage of nuclear matter and nuclear politics that spanned decades of Japanese culture, but came to a head in the Fukushima tragedy, Barad writes,

> All these material-discursive phenomena are constituted through each other, each in specifically entangled ways. This is not a mere matter of things being connected across scales. Rather, matter itself in its very materiality is differentially constituted

> as an implosion/explosion: a superposition of all possible histories constituting each bit. The very stuff of the world is a matter of politics (Barad, 2017: p. G117).

This is what I am referring to when I mention the relevance of agency as the process through which material matter comes – not just to 'matter' – but to have meaning. It is possible, and – I think – necessary, for actions (not necessarily decisions) of players of games to have impacts on the outcome of not only play sessions, but also to extend outwards into the depths of history. While I'm not proposing this as an essential criteria for every game, I think it is an essential step for games to take if they are to be understood as an art form and, what is more, if understanding game agency is not to be limited to only the fictional or rule-based world of a game at hand.

To make the impact of actions clear, I think it is essential that a game strike the balance between player actions and universal outcomes. Few games have struck this balance well – many place the player in too essential a role; in a place where the course of history rests on their shoulders (the *Assassin's Creed* series, for instance). In this position, players are given the opportunity to play with this digital mediation of history like a God, rather than simply being 'of' the world. I don't believe it's possible to really experience agency in this context as our actions take on an absurd quality. I think we know as humans that it is uncommon for one being to have so much power. It is for this reason that I want to turn to *The Return of the Obra Dinn*. Its balance of mundane gameplay with sweeping supernatural and ultimately complex social history fulfils a vision of Baradian agency extending throughout time and space in a political and ethical manner.

THE MYSTERY OF THE OBRA DINN

Playing Pope's nautical mystery game, one thing becomes clear quite quickly: very little is given back to players for their actions (at least, in the conventional sense of agency). Indeed, to paraphrase the declaration from the game that gives this paper its title, players are to take exactly what the game gives them and to expect nothing more. *Return of the Obra Dinn* tasks players with exploring the wrecked trading ship (or 'East Indiaman') in the year 1807 when it suddenly reappears in the docks at Falmouth, England, after it was mysteriously lost five years prior. Players must navigate through the ship that is increasingly open for exploration, attempting to uncover the circumstances that lead to the ship's abandonment. To that end, players have at their disposal an enchanted pocket watch that allows them to observe the final moments of the deceased's lives: on approaching one of the game's many corpses, pressing the appropriate key on their keyboard or clicking the button on their mouse, players can listen to the last words (or, in some cases, sounds) of a crew member's life, before they are given the chance to explore their last moment of life, in the form of a tableau, frozen in time. Players must use deductive reasoning to guess the names of the crew and clarify the circumstances of their death.

The 'flashback' – for lack of better word – that gives this paper its title occurs near the beginning of the game, and relays how Captain Robert Witterel lays waste to mutineers. When the mutineers exclaim that they intend to take the captain's hidden treasure, Witterel retorts, "You bastards may take… exactly what I give you" before firing on and killing one William Hoscut, the ship's first mate.

To someone who has not played the game, *Obra Dinn* may sound like an engaging adventure filled with murder and piracy. However, like Captain Witterell, the game also 'gives' players very little, and certainly not what one might have been expecting. Unlike in similarly nautically themed games, such as *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Kiekan, Guedson & Ishmail, 2013), *Return of the Obra Dinn* does not place players in control of another swashbuckling pirate, out to solve a mystery for treasure, love, or the pirate code; the player does not take part in sword fights, sailing ships, or any form of 'pillaging'. Rather, in *Obra Dinn*, players take control of an East India Company inspector working within the insurance and claims office. Their motivation (the avatar is either male or female) for undertaking this enterprise is that they received a letter from their employer, asking them to carry out a full inspection of the ship (Figure 1). It is only once they have boarded the ship that greater depth is given to their journey: the Chief Inspector has been given a book, presumably by their employer, that once belonged to the ship's former surgeon Henry Evans. Inside the book, Evans includes a letter asking the Chief Inspector to investigate the

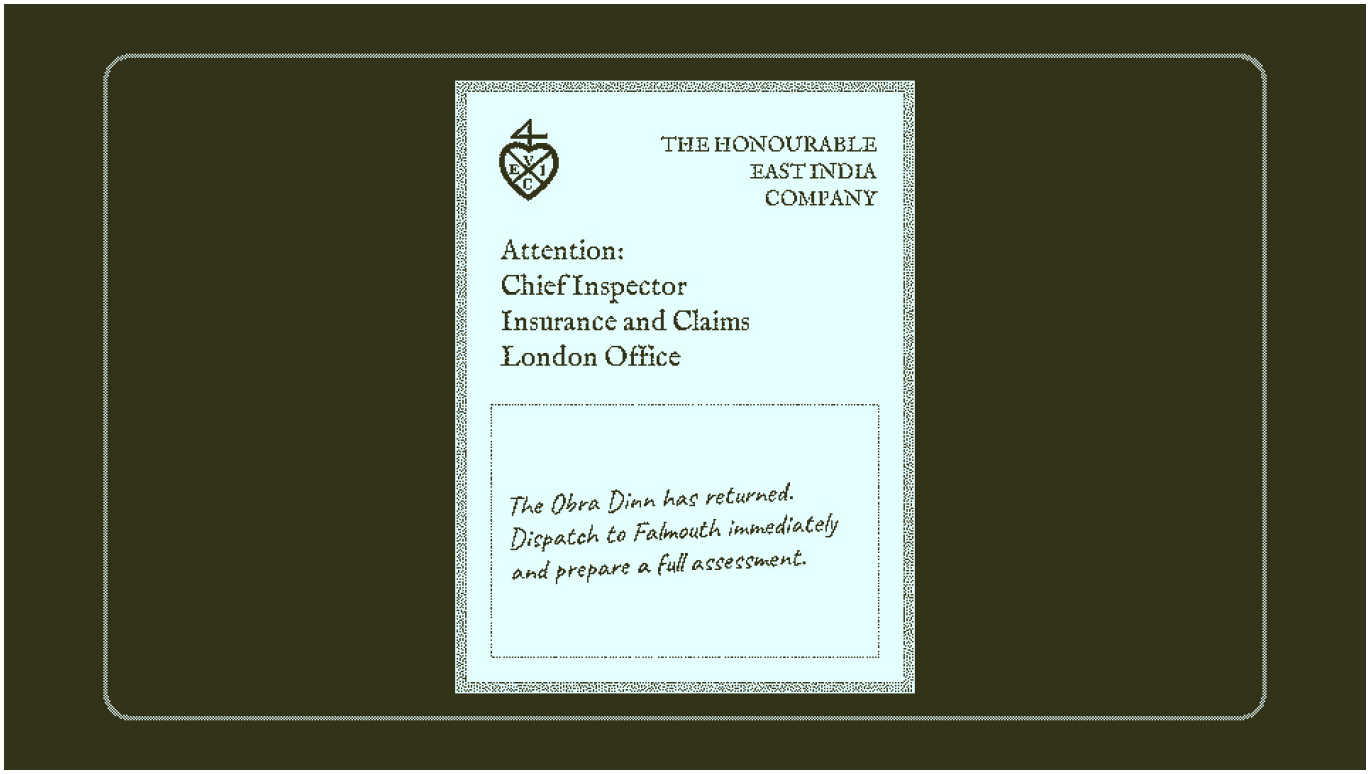


Figure 1 – The call to action

mysterious circumstances surrounding the vessel before returning a completed account of the mystery to Evans in Morocco: the only mention of a reward of any kind is that if the player is able to complete the mystery they will learn the contents of a hidden chapter of the book.

Admittedly, there are many reasons why one might enjoy *Obra Dinn*: in order to 'hook' players, the game employs a remarkably distinctive aesthetic, achieved through the combination of high-definition audio recordings (including voice actors, ambient creaks and waves and period correct music) and, of course, the game's unmistakable dot-matrix graphics filter. Beyond this, the core mechanic of using a ghostly pocket watch to engage in a literal form of 'memento mortem' – remembering death – by travelling into the mind's eye of deceased crew members is evocative of a rich legacy of ghost stories and nautical lore. However, before long, players will come to realise that the seemingly banal motivation of an insurance assessment was not a ruse but is our intended purpose; players are restricted from intervening on the course of events or in affecting any change upon the world of the game. Instead of taking an active role in the story, the player must simply attempt to piece together an account of the relationships and actions that took place prior to the chronological beginning of the syuzhet, and fill in the blanks in the book they were given by Evans: for each death the player witnesses in a flashback, they must attempt to fathom who the person was, how they died and who killed them, using only the audio and tableau's as sources of information. Players must use deductive reasoning to guess the names of the crew and clarify the circumstances of their death. On entering their guesses into the log book, players are told if they are either right or wrong, after every three guesses they make. Although some forms of death are so similar that it will not make much difference whether the player guesses that the deceased was 'drowned by the beast', 'mauled by the beast', 'eaten by the beast' etc. (all of these are considered 'correct' by the game), the player can only ever be correct or incorrect. The motivation of the avatar is not personal, they are not attempting to change the course of history – they are, quite simply, doing their job.

Those familiar with Lucas Pope's previous game, *Papers, Please* (2013), an equally renown success, will know his distinctly unconventional design. In *Papers, Please* players take control of a border control officer in the fictional dictatorship of Arstotzka and must examine those wishing to cross the country's border. Limiting the player's freedom, placing them in a seemingly mundane, bureaucratic role within a world that is implied to be nuanced, complex, and full of autonomous actors with a range of motivations, provides an unusual spin on many game design doctrines. However, unlike *Obra Dinn*, in *Papers, Please* players have the distinct feeling that their actions – the decisions they make about the individual immigrants within the fictional world – are of increasing consequence, ultimately as a trigger for revolution or else further enforcement of the dictatorial regime. Jason Morrissette puts this in the following terms claiming the game "leverages its repetitious gameplay and bleak narrative to represent a debate that

shapes the lives of millions of people around the world on a daily basis, whether the player chooses to bring glory to Arstotzka or risk it all for a better tomorrow" (Morrissette, 2017). There is no such engagement within *Obra Dinn*. The choices players make do not decide the fate of any of the characters onboard; they simply do or do not solve the mysteries presented by using the available clues, the outcome of which is minimal. There is a wonderful discord at play in *Obra Dinn* as players continue to evoke presumably ancient magic to transcend time and space in order to – anticlimactically – better estimate an insurance payout.

AGENCY ON THE OBRA DINN

On beginning the game after reading the intertitles that appear in the form of perfunctory letters outlining the mysterious nature of the Obra Dinn (a newspaper clipping describing that the "good ship Obra Dinn" is "lost at sea" and the orders from the Chief Inspector's employers requesting an insurance assessment), the player is free to explore the ship. However, all that awaits the player is a corpse and two locked doors. The player can climb up and down a ladder leading to a small dinghy that brought the Chief Inspector to this location; they can wander freely for as much as they so choose; however, without further assistance, or some new means of expanding the space they find themselves in, the player is bound to these confines. Reflecting on Murray, Aarseth and Wardrip Fruin et al's definitions of agency established earlier in the paper, we can read this opening state as an intentional disavowal of the tenets of agency as a convention of game design. Unlike Murray's suggestions of what generates agency, there is an extremely limited number of player options and the impact of our choices is minimal – as established, our actions cannot change the history we see in any meaningful way; we are only permitted slight variations in how we record the past. Similarly, the objects, characters, setting and so forth of the game do not support the player in their activity as either Aarseth or Wardrip-Fruin et al. suggest they should. The game is very evidently a game and no new elements of the game will emerge to help a player through it should they get lost or stuck. When it is not being prompted to action by player engagement, the computer system is almost unnervingly inert.

It may seem trivial to focus on the initial setting of a game, when players are unable to do much of meaning. However, I want to frame this process, players initially discovering their boundaries on the ship, as itself a form of agency in Barad's formulation of the term. Although players discover they are restricted, this act of discovery is an expression of co-constitution and agency on both sides of the player-system relationship. As the player exhausts their possibilities (contrary to Bogost's notion of the possibility space) so too does the machine reinforce these limitations. Understanding this as agency requires a slight shift in mentality, away from notions of objects and distinct actors and towards a shared form of agency that is created prior to the becoming of apparent 'things'. This form of discovery between player and machine is, in my mind, rather dif-

ferent from the collaboration suggested by Wardrip-Fruin et al. The computer system is not upholding the player's expectations – it remains resolute. Rather, I think it is possible to see this process as analogous to the processes of scientific measurement, such as the labelling of photonic energy as either particle or wave, depending on the configuration of the measuring apparatus used. This kind of diffractive process, defined by Barad as an agential 'cut', can be read as a moment when "the apparatus enacts an agential cut – a resolution of the ontological indeterminacy – within the phenomenon" (p. 175). The players are not just exploring, they are ultimately involved in *creating* the Obra Dinn, in cooperation with their computer, Lucas Pope (and so on, and so on).

Of course, one might rightly assume that it would be possible to say this of many so-called 'walking simulator' games that share qualities with *Obra Dinn*. In restricting the ways in which players can act, a seemingly different focus must emerge from play. Indeed, Melissa Kagen (2018) suggests that walking sims "force a player into relative passivity, a state at odds with the interactive agency prized in videogame design". However, there is a reason for my choosing *Obra Dinn* over *Myst* (Cyan, 1993), *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012) or *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013) to name but a few. Put simply, there is a unique quality to *Obra Dinn* that caught my attention – the fusion of seemingly meaningless actions with the production of a wide-reaching impact. This is not a common quality within many walking simulators. Within *Myst*, for instance, the player is not simply a hapless insurance investigator whose actions have no bearing on the game world – rather, the anonymous stranger the player inhabits comes to play an essential role in the resolution of the game's plot as they must either become captive on the mysterious island or enable the escape of one of the game's central characters. Similarly, Bo Ruberg (2019) has pointed out the restrictive nature of the game play as many of these games limit the potential impact of their narratives. In their paper on *Gone Home*, for instance, Ruberg reflects on how the game's straight paths restrict the potential for queer play and reflect the underlying normativity of the game itself. *Obra Dinn*, by comparison, seems purposefully designed to prevent the creation of linear paths and even allows several different possibilities in the recounting of the various crew members' fates.

This is not to say the quality I identify in *Obra Dinn* is entirely unique to it. *The Stanley Parable*, for instance, can be read in wonderfully illuminating ways and Kagen's article on *Firewatch* draws attention to a positive example of a form of 'queering' that is achieved through walking simulator design. Indeed, *Firewatch* could have been used to make a similar point to the one I am attempting to make here: it similarly restricts the actions a player can take ("There's a reason it's called *Firewatch* and not *Firefight*" Kagen writes) but – counter-intuitively – in doing so, it says a great deal about the cultural-political surrounding context of the game. In being relegated to watching, rather than fighting, the game – Kagen argues – critiques the concept of hyper-masculinity that is so popular throughout digital gaming as a medium. This is an excellent example

of the kind of 'agency' that I think we can identify within games; however, I have chosen *Obra Dinn* for its specific, explicit, far reaching commentary on global political and historical contexts, as well as for its supernatural elements suggesting a kind of boundless agency, extending even beyond the comments on gender and culture suggested by *Firewatch*.

Given then the almost unique appeal of *Obra Dinn*, its uniquely limited-yet-impactful agency and the fundamental insignificance of our character on the game world, I want to return to how agency is removed from the player or even from the digital actors (following Barad, "in an agential realist account, agency is cut loose from its traditional humanist orbit" (p. 177)) and recast as preceding 'things', giving rise to phenomena that produce apparent things. As I have highlighted, when exploration of the Obra Dinn is accepted in this intra-active manner, the core gameplay loop becomes a process matter making.

However, while exploring the empty ship can be understood as a form of 'spacetimemattering' in Barad's terminology, of co-constitutively making the ship in material terms, I believe that as the game progresses, this matter-making becomes a process of meaning-making. This starts small at first: perhaps even in the first time players are exposed to the concept of 'Obra Dinn' (a strange and exotic sounding concept to a native English speaker), the title of the game. Players then further generate semiotic constructions of the phrase when exposed to the game's landing page that shows a simple graphic of the titular ship drifting in a vast ocean. Players then read about the ship in the brief snippets before finally being able to construct their own specific reality of the ship itself by exploring it. It is not simply that we create a ship, we understand that this is a ship within the specific lineage of the British East India company at the height of the colonial 19th century, whose journey was set to begin from England, to continue through Europe and on to the continent of Africa. The game's title is evocative of the orientalism of the time where "othered" human cultures stirred almost otherworldly fascination – but also as the "set of structures inherited from the past, secularised, redisposed and reformed" in the orientalism that continues to inform the processes through which global politics are conducted today (Said, 1978, p. 122).

This initial invitation to begin imbuing the late crew of the ship with meaning is reinforced through the early interpersonal dynamics of the first few characters that we discover. Indeed, the first four deaths that we witness – internally, the events of the final chapter of the found book – are three mutineers murdered by the ship's captain, and then the captain himself as he commits suicide, after apologising to the body of his wife, Abigail, for having shot her brother. The relationships players engage with here are not entirely out of the ordinary for a nautical adventure. Yet the player's role in this is, seemingly, entirely inconsequential. We simply witness these acts and do our best to extract and quantify data from this interpersonal human drama. To an extent, we can view this dispassionate engagement with events as something akin

to Arendt's banality of evil:[1] the player chooses to continue passively allowing these murderous events to unfold in service of some greater abstract ideal, bureaucratically cataloguing the details. However, there is another way to view these formative events. This exploration of the crew's narrative can be fruitfully viewed as akin to the physical exploration of the ship. However, distinct from how our exploration reveals the material becoming of the ship, unveiling its hidden physical dimensions through our continued searching, this new form of exploration fills the ship's materiality with meaning. We are still engaged in the process of uncovering, but now we are configuring materiality to give rise to intricate human narratives. This is as clear a depiction of the process of Barad's agency as I can imagine one could hope to draw from digital gaming. The history and events of the ship and its crew are all always already contained within the vessel. Through the use of our cutting apparatus – our ghostly stopwatch, a proxy to the two-slit experiment or electron microscope – we engage in the reconfiguration of reality, unveiling various levels of the sediment of history, out of joint but each undeniably real within the context of the game.

The second element of *Obra Dinn* that I want to draw attention to is a form of agency that is illusive and troubling: that of the role of the unknown. Most superficially, it takes the form of the various monsters throughout the game that confront the player with their horrific shapes and are the active cause of death for many of the crew. Their agency, however, is entangled with the player's – although we can read the supernatural creatures as, perhaps, acting on behalf of the ocean or the essentialist 'natural' non-human, it should be clear by now that there is no need for a metaphorical actor on the part of the nonhuman when playing a game – as Wardrip-Fruin et al point out, we are constantly engaging with our non-human other when playing digital games. Both human and machine are understood being equally produced and defined through the act of play within the agential realist framework. For this reason, I am tempted to read the inclusion of the supernatural within *Obra Dinn* as something of a red herring. Directly following the death of the ship's captain, early in the game, we see that the majority of the ship's crew lost their lives at the hands of a giant kraken (the cover image of this paper). While this gives the plot of the game a certain lift, I think it also attempts to pull the player away from the more powerfully evocative forms of agency in the game. It is tempting to see the kraken as exemplary of the forms of classic agency given its ability to exact its will. However, there is a limit to how much the agency of the imagined non-human can reverberate through the material history that otherwise shapes the game. This irony is present in the game as although the memories in which in the kraken tears apart various crew members are initially terrifying, players will soon realise that they are not in any danger. They are as free to explore these memories as any others. The actions of the kraken, mermaids and crab-mounted others of the game are ultimately as consequential to the lives of the crew as the rocking of the boat, or the influence of sickness and poor sanitation.

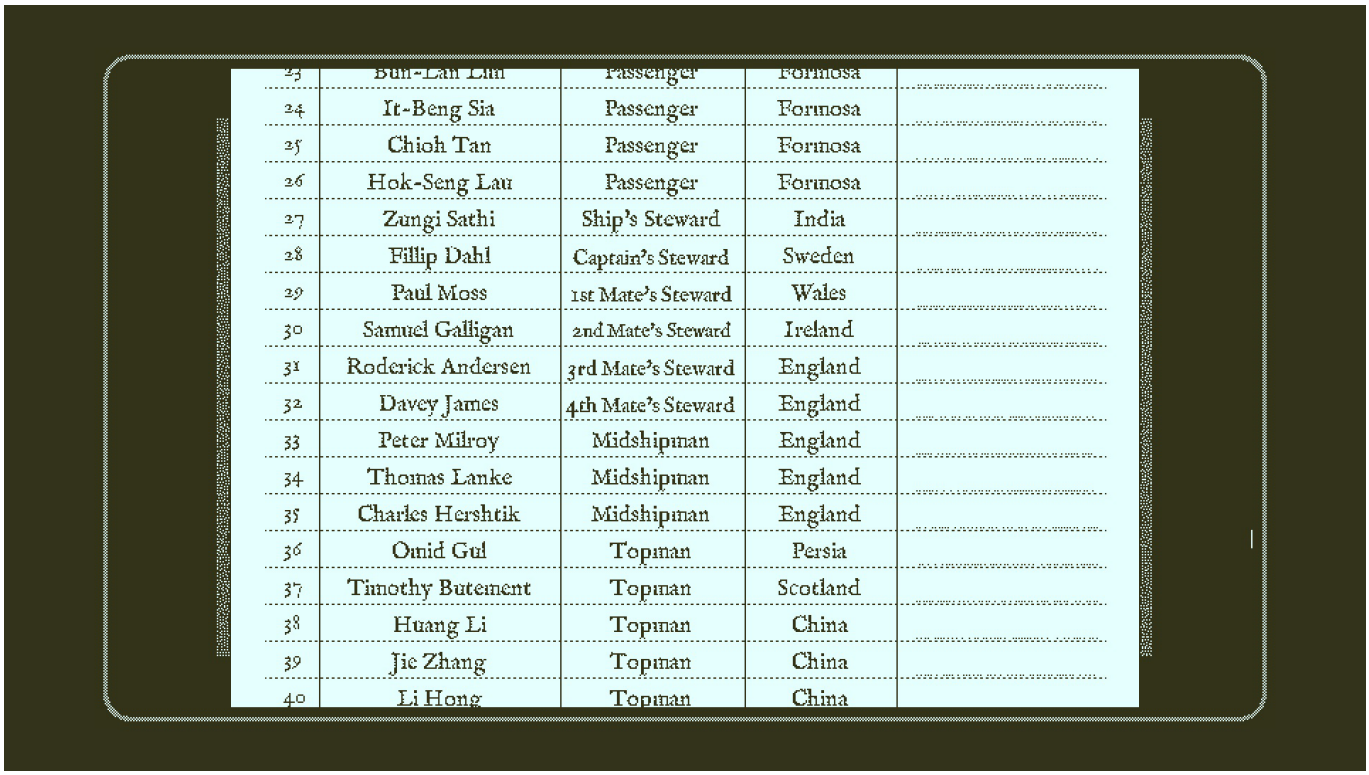
1. Hannah Arendt's theory of the "word-and-thought-defying banality of the evil" (2003, p. 365) was the product of her observations of the trial and execution of Nazi war criminal Otto Adolf Eichmann whose actions in the Second World War included creating lists and statistics that helped facilitate the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Jewish people from Germany and eventually personally overseeing the Final Solution or mass executions of over 437,000 Jews in Hungary. Arendt's theory, broadly speaking, can be understood as the role of bureaucracy in dehumanising and facilitating genocide and other criminal acts. Eichmann is framed by Arendt as a participant in and facilitator of this evil, portrayed as more interested in efficiency and facilitation of institutional actions than the ideology behind them. His actions are detailed but with an emphasis on the forms he made Jews sign; forms that semi-legalised their own executions, enabled their belongings to be legally subsumed into the Nazi government and account for their movements and numbers. She notes that "as far as Eichmann could see, no one protested, no one refused to co-operate" (p. 346). Reflecting on the his personality, she describes Eichmann as the kind of person "who never made a decision on his own, who was extremely careful always to be 'covered' by orders, who—as freely given testimony from practically all the people who had worked with him confirmed—did not even like to volunteer suggestions and always required 'directives'" (p. 329). It is even noted that Eichmann made a failed attempt to send many of the Jewish prisoners to a camp in Lódz where preparations for execution were not yet complete. However, Eichmann – Arendt informs us – took the view of this situation "that he had not disobeyed an order but only taken advantage of a 'choice'". Arendt later clarifies that "what he fervently believed in up to the end was success, the chief standard of 'good society' as he knew it" (p. 355). Although Arendt's portrayal of Eichmann has been heavily

criticised with some contending that Eichmann was an ideologically devoted Nazi (Stangneth, 2014), the theory is still of great importance for understanding agency, particularly the kind of compliant agency that is encouraged by digital games. Reflecting on *Obra Dinn* we investigate the deaths of each member of the crew but never attempt to use our time travelling powers to intervene in these deaths. Our interest, reminiscent of Eichmann's reliance on forms as Ardent portrayed him, is in completing the paperwork behind the deaths of the many crew-members of the boat, perhaps motivated by some ill-defined promise of that "good society" of the East India Company and our mysterious benefactor that have tasked us with authority.

The third, and key method, by which *Obra Dinn* goes beyond a passing resemblance with Barad's theories is how it stretches the implications of events throughout time and space by entangling the player in social and racial orders. Throughout the game players identify the crew based on the flashbacks they see, but also by using three depictions of the crew (Figure 2) and a list of their names (Figure 3). Although much of the drama of *Obra Dinn* revolves around the inclusion of supernatural elements (murderous mermaids, giant crab riders and even a monstrous kraken) rather than setting the mystery in a fictional sea, in a fictional time and therefore at a remove from human history, Pope instead embraces the complexities of human history and culture and attempts to entangle it into these supernatural elements. The crew, as you can see from the crew list, is composed of many nations and races. However, this is not done simply as an empty gesture. The crew of *Obra Dinn* share the racial and political tensions one would expect of the early 19th century. Indeed, even the colonial title of Taiwan as 'Formosa' is heavily present in the crew list.

Throughout the game, we slowly discover that it is the racial and class-driven tensions between crew and passengers that stoke much of the tragedy that befalls the Obra Dinn. In an early chapter of the book, but one that is uncovered quite late in the game, players witness the murder of Nunzio Pasqua, the sole Italian passenger on board, at the hands of the English second mate, Edward Nichols. The race of these characters is important here, as Nichols murders Pasqua to cover up his own attempted theft of the 'Formosan' treasure.

Figure 2 – The engraving of the crew



23	Bun-Lan Lim	Passenger	Formosa	
24	It-Beng Sia	Passenger	Formosa	
25	Chioh Tan	Passenger	Formosa	
26	Hok-Seng Lau	Passenger	Formosa	
27	Zungi Sathi	Ship's Steward	India	
28	Fillip Dahl	Captain's Steward	Sweden	
29	Paul Moss	1st Mate's Steward	Wales	
30	Samuel Galligan	2nd Mate's Steward	Ireland	
31	Roderick Andersen	3rd Mate's Steward	England	
32	Davey James	4th Mate's Steward	England	
33	Peter Milroy	Midshipman	England	
34	Thomas Lanke	Midshipman	England	
35	Charles Hershtik	Midshipman	England	
36	Omid Gul	Topman	Persia	
37	Timothy Butement	Topman	Scotland	
38	Huang Li	Topman	China	
39	Jie Zhang	Topman	China	
40	Li Hong	Topman	China	

Figure 3 – The crew's manifest.

Nichols is aware that the crew on board will not question his assertion that Pasqua, an Italian, was murdered by Hok-Seng Lau, the Formosan passenger. This plays out exactly as he expects, as Lau is subsequently executed. However, this only initiates the chain of events that leads to the downfall of the ship. I find there to be direct parallels here with Barad's writing on the 'haunting' of the Japanese Fukushima nuclear disaster. They assert that past events linger but that they are not immaterial; rather, the very material forces of nationalism, racism, global capitalism, resource management etc. are all entangled into the geopolitical machinations that must be navigated in the wake of such an event.

The player must similarly navigate a condensed form of time in *Obra Dinn* and continue to reify the troubled, entangled histories of the crew of the vessel. The Obra Dinn itself ceases to be merely a means of transportation but becomes a locus of the flux of human activity and agency amidst the swelling industrial and trade revolution that the East India Company was so instrumentally a part of. The violence witnessed here against East Asian passengers is no coincidence, given the rising threat of the opium wars on the near political horizon of the time period in which the game is set. As the player has no choice but to continually delve into the past and uncover more examples of dehumanising treatment, witnessing man's inhumanity to man, it is difficult not to feel enveloped in the interweaving agencies of the crew members that we are, along with the machine, Pope etc., bringing into being, alongside the troubled im-

aginaries of histories of trade and colonialism that are similarly entangled with a player's activity as a participant in this game as co-constitutive performance.

Embracing *Obra Dinn* as a lesson in new design experience suggests the need to move past the idea of agency as the property of independent things existing concretely within the world; instead, we can embrace the notion of apparent things only ever passingly brought forth, diffractively, through a host of universal processes. This is evident not only in the becoming through co-constitution discussed first, but also in a broader sense: the world of *Obra Dinn* can be understood as a complex history of entangled events, constantly coming into being. Becoming is not a matter of one entity becoming whole, but rather a chronology, an order, an existence, constantly in emergence. The world that is created is not fictional, not within our grasp or our control and yet we are part of it.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have proposed a new form of agency that is not dependent on the provision of meaningful actions for the player; greater or lesser agency is, instead, resultant from the perception of agency as a shared phenomenon that produces both the player and the virtual world they are engaging with. *Obra Dinn* feels like an intensely engaging experience – not because the player can make a meaningful impact upon the game world, but because the player cannot help but become sensate of the immense agency that enables the game's world, but also its comments on real world colonialism, and the player's place within these. What makes *Obra Dinn* so important for understanding this as a theory for agency is that the player is, functionally, almost entirely removed from the agency of the other actors within the game. The player cannot affect the particular history of others, and the other actors within the game cannot affect the history of the player. Yet, without the player, the histories of the characters will not unfold and the entangled web of actions and interactions between them and the world in which the game is set (a magical realist interpretation of the colonial history of the British Empire) will not emerge. I have argued that the player of *Obra Dinn* does not 'have' agency but, rather, is a part of the co-constitution of agency. Yet, this feeling of being a part of the becoming of the world, is just as rewarding as saving the world.

It is a natural conclusion to presume players have limited agency if they do not appear to be able to impact a game world in obvious ways; yet games like *Return of the Obra Dinn* are tremendously rewarding experiences. I suggest then, that it is perhaps our concept of agency that is flawed. In this paper, I tested the boundaries of using agential realism to discuss agency and interactivity by exploring a game that limits player agency and proposes a new intra-activity. In contrast to what we might think given Murray, Aarseth and Stang's understandings of agency, I argue that *Obra Dinn* is an immensely agential experience so long as we understand agency in a distributed manner. Of course, *Obra Dinn* is just one game and much more work must be done to continue testing

the legitimacy of this theory. However, I suggest that if agency in games is not understood as our capacity to impact on the game world, but rather as the mode through which things come to be, in accordance to Barad's philosophy, we can envisage our actions as akin to the ebb and flow of agency as a fundamental part of the universe. This could represent a complete overhaul in how developers and players approach game design and play. If players and designers were to focus on games as the processes of creating worlds and phenomena that enable players to feel engaged in world-making processes, this would open the floor to new ideas for design, narrative and inter(intra)activity.

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STEPHANIE JENNINGS
jenni267@msu.edu
Michigan State University

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 reinstituting 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 by 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 Indigenously-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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