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 inter-activity 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 Holo-deck*, 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 mean-ingful 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 "participa-tion" (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 environ-ments" 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 inter-action 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 propo-sition 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 pro-cedures. 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 engage-ment 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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