

Intra-Active Play. Or What do Video Games have to do with Quantum Physics?

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INTRODUCTION

This paper repositions the categories of players and games as subjects and objects, arguing that a different story of digital play needs to be put in place. Games change us as much as we change them. Out of this observation emerges a pledge for a posthuman and performative media aesthetics of play, drawing heavily from the philosophy of Karen Barad (2003, 2007), a feminist philosopher of technology and a theoretical physicist. I want to entertain a somewhat controversial proposition – that players and games as such do not exist, at least not in the sense we have got used to think about the two. Neither players nor games can be seen as clear-cut pre-defined entities, preceding and preexisting the moment of play. Only through and within play both unfold in a mutual ludic embrace. As I will argue, to challenge the prevalent patterns of thinking about videogaming and what follows digital play, we need to take a performative turn. And Barad's philosophy of agential realism provides a perfect framework to do that.

Agential realism emerges at the crossroads between the physico-philosophy of a physicist Niels Bohr and the feminist performative philosophies of Donna Haraway and Judith Butler. It could also be placed in the long line of other theoretical approaches and heterogeneous discursive fields contributing to the so-called “material turn”, such as: Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (1987), Michel Foucault's dispositive (1980), interdisciplinary perspectives developed under a broad banner of “the ecology of mind” (Bateson 1977), as well as new materialism and posthumanism (Braidotti 2013, Ferrando 2019, Wolfe 2010). Although grounded in different disciplines, all the above thought movements, methods and theoretical approaches have one thing in common – they challenge the Western anthropocentric position of the human in the world. The human is no longer a central agent but part of a complex network of agencies, human and non-human alike; and matter is no longer seen as “dead”. Let me express it more bluntly – video games have never been interactive. Interactivity as a concept has been simply taken at face value. But to be able to see an alternative, as Barad succinctly puts it, “it takes a healthy skepticism toward Cartesian doubt” (Barad 2003, 807). So, let's get skeptical.

Leaning on Barad's ontological framework, I want to move away from interaction towards *intra-action* that is from a symmetrical action flow exerted by the human player upon the game or the gaming apparatus to a fluid entanglement of forces. Video gaming is a particularly fascinating exemplary set-up for Baradian theory of agential realism as

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games (at least in their computerized form) share a lot of similarities with measurement apparatuses. While playing, we are leaving behind huge amounts of raw data. And since play takes place within a staged encoded environment, each of our moves can be potentially recorded and extracted for later analysis. In this context, a game becomes part of a larger apparatus calibrated to “pin down” play with numbers, graphs, and patterns. In this paper I will look into game analytics as a specific field, which illustrates the crossover between agential realism with gaming.

It is also worth mentioning that Karen Barad is not entirely unknown to games scholarship. Justyna Janik (2019, 2021) has worked with the concept of intra-action to discuss video game glitches (short-lived faults in the digital system) as manifestations of the agency of the video game. Conor McKeown (2018) has applied Barad’s philosophy to the analysis of software as an entangled phenomenon. Although the perspective proposed in this talk remains a rather niche subject, it remains in dialogue with the overarching philosophical movement of posthumanism and connected with it non-anthropocentrism, which have appeared much more often in the study of games (Chang 2019, Giddings 2005, Mäyrä 2019, Ruffino 2020, Stasieńko 2021).

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