

# ***Control* (2019) and Concrete: The Haunting Thingness of Digital Assets**

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## **Keywords**

New Materialism, Thing Theory, Control, Assets, Visuality, Ontology, Brutalism

## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

This abstract reads *Control* (Remedy Entertainment, 2019) through cultural-historical and new materialist lenses as a game concerned with the strangeness of things<sup>1</sup>. Textual analysis unpacks the historical-ontological resonances of concrete as agentic, ambivalent material omnipresent in the Brutalist iconography of *Control*. This is a game centered on a secretive federal bureau inhabiting an ineffably ancient and non-Euclidean concrete structure, ‘The Oldest House’, where everyday items contain spatio-temporal powers. Remedy’s output has been largely ignored by scholarship<sup>2</sup>, but represents a sustained interest in what Fisher (2016) calls ‘eerie’ opaque agency and ‘weird’ presences beyond the familiar (*Alan Wake* 2010; *Quantum Break*, 2016). Employing Visual Studies approaches and contextual reading that might redress this omission, this abstract uses its case study as a ‘cement-mixer’ to aggregate things and theory, contributing to nonhuman turn and representational Game Studies.

Game Studies has been accused of marginalising visuality (Keogh 2018; Murray, 2017), and Bogost’s (2012) orientation towards ‘things’ has largely manifested in Platform Studies analyses of the substructure of games (Altice, 2015; Custodio 2020) rather than games’ representation of things. However, as Keogh (2018), Murray (2017) and Anable (2018) argue, games’ visuality offers powerful aesthetic, ideological and embodied experiences. Visual surfaces are significant when code is predominantly encountered as visual assets, moreover surfaces mediate the world and are thus more than ‘superficial’ (Anusas & Simonetti, 2020:1). Indeed, even Callois became enraptured by the aesthetics of stone surfaces, its nonhuman creative capacities expressed in uncannily mimetic shapes that unsettle anthropocentric agency, a “mysticism of matter” (1985:xiv) manifest in ‘The Oldest House.’ Affective surfaces provide the material for discussing the relationship of things which manifest eerily as texture to players where the interiors of objects and code remain opaque.

Visually *Control* is fascinated with stony surfaces, from polished slabs to rough fluted walls, the Northlight Engine’s early adoption of modern ray tracing accentuates the textural qualities of its physics-based rendering of materials and their deformation. Concrete chunks cleave and surfaces shimmer. Combined with liquid distortions in post-processing and layered kaleidoscopic visuals signifying extra-dimensional agencies that power things, we have a strong sense of what Böhme would call

**Proceedings of DiGRA 2022**

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‘conjured’ ‘atmospheric materialities’ (2016:14). Here the player’s telekinesis exemplifies the strange suffusion of play with materiality, with the ability to rip hunks of concrete into the air, our spooky action at a distance echoing Morton’s thesis that objects are ineffable, we perceive only their “existence-for-the-other” (Morton 2013b:21). Returning to Bogost (2012), *Control* is interested in the strangeness of ‘things’: a 1960s mise-en-scène of concrete, bakelite phones, and light-switches that teleport users to abandoned motels.

These obsolete, malfunctioning objects become things, their material exposed by defamiliarization (Brown, 2001:4). Moreover, narratively many *Control*’s hero props are *agentic* things, such as an old fridge that threatens violence if unobserved. So-called Altered Items and Objects Of Power express the hidden depths of material agency contained by everyday ‘inanimate’ objects like concrete that nevertheless act on and through us: “materiality is both too alien and too close for humans to see clearly” (Bennett, 2004:349).

Our entanglement with *Control*’s metamorphic sand constitutes eerie ‘knots’ in the vast networks of material agencies (Iovino & Opperman, 2014:1). Annually humans use 50 billion tons of sand, binding it to make concrete and melting it to make silicon (Beiser, 2018:1). Beiser and Siever (1988) describe it as elusive material whose diverse forms compose more than we realise. The sand economy constitutes a ‘hyperobject’ (Morton, 2013a): a vast and pervasive mesh that defies rational understanding, to the extent that we have produced enough concrete to cast the planet (Truscello, 2020:12) but are “running out of [usable] sand” (Beiser, 2018:249). When Forty (2012) argues that concrete is characterized by strange ambivalence as ancient/modern, synthesized/natural, this speaks to both the disorienting temporality of sand that sediments and erodes in 200-million-year cycles (Siever, 1988:55) and recent nostalgia for failed Brutalist utopias of the past (Holleran, 2021; Mould, 2017). While in the late 1960s public-works concrete became associated with ugliness and authoritarianism, in recent years Brutalism has become a hauntologous specter of a possible egalitarian world (Derrida, 1993) when our lives are trapped in ‘brutal’ networks of roads and silicon that “promise mobility without freedom” in their soft power concrete infrastructures (Truscello, 2020).

*Control* here mobilizes the strange ontology of sand-based materials alongside the historical ghost of infrastructural power highlighting current ambivalences, what Truscello (via Galloway) calls neoliberalism’s systems of ‘protocol’ and Deleuze terms ‘societies of control.’ The postwar West replaced hard power with obfuscated exploitation: freedom to work anywhere and anytime but effectively everywhere and all the time, a networked society of freedom without change. In *Control* the deep time and agency of the Oldest House’s sand, and the social-historical context of 1960s retrofuturist aesthetics<sup>3</sup>, intersect in a haunting, weird, and eerie present-day setting that renders work and architecture fluid, ineffable and oppressive. The apparent edifice of disciplinary society, *Control*’s endless offices, is repeatedly broken open with shifting walls, fractal concrete blocks and distorting shaders. Vertiginous Brutalist arenas are intercut with montages of impossible underground housing blocks in cut-scenes that cut between strange dimensions. In the penultimate level, we are trapped in an interminable ‘internship,’ facing familiar 21<sup>st</sup>-century precarity Deleuze would call: “the limitless postponements of the societies of control” (1995:200).

Videogames connect players to the strange world of an obscured everyday object, computation: they “entangle us in a circuit of feeling between their computational systems and the broader systems with which they interface: ideology, narrative, aesthetics...” (Anable, 2018:xii). *Control*’s fictive architecture is thus a ‘medial hinge’ in Bonner’s sense (2021). I argue that *Control* entangles us in the historical, aesthetic

and ontological systems of Brutalism's memory and the hyperobject of sand that metaphorically spills between fictive concrete and the silicon subtending play. This entanglement, however, is murky.

Sand may just be tiny quartz, but as Cohen argues, stone is an alien other that effects "limit-breaching intimacy" (2015:2). The haunting weirdness of things shows how mundane materials can have a strange hold over us: "We are there/everywhere [...] We expect Independence/Dependence." (The Board, *Control*, 2019).

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## ENDNOTES

1. A 'thing' is an inanimate object estranged from its relation to the human, such as a broken tool (Brown, 2001), or as an example from *Control*, plastic pink flamingo that alters the weather.
2. With the exception of Elisa (2019) who reads *Quantum Break* (Remedy, 2016) as a seamless example of game-centric transmedia.
3. This is seeing a darkly uncanny repetition in other recent games such as *We Happy Few* (Compulsion Games, 2016) and *Deathloop* (2021), which I arguably speaks to hauntologous specter of 1960s utopianism in our present perpetual austerity and climate crisis.