Meaningful Transformation: Intra-activity and Video Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While there are a few publications in the field of game studies that focus on posthuman approaches (Bogost 2010, Jessen & Jessen 2014, Wirman 2014, Gualeni & Westerlaken 2016, Fizek 2018), there is still a need for works that focus on the creation of meaning inside the player-game relation and the play process itself – and that, at the same time, would emphasize the ethical foundation of a posthuman approach focused on the human relation with technology. With that in mind, in this presentation I will explore the concept of intra-actions (Barad 2007) to the study of digital game play. It is my claim that using this conceptual lens as a means of framing digital game play would show how both the video game object and the player transform each other, not only to determine their own ontic borders, but also co-create meanings.

Karen Barad's concept of intra-action is integral part of her ethico-onto-epistemology or agential realism, in which reality is not composed of fixed entities with definite qualities, but is constituted by phenomena that do not have predetermined boundaries or features. They are just "relations without preexisting relata" (Barad 2007, 139). They start to form their individual properties only through specific material-discursive practices, which are the "ongoing agential intra-actions of the world" (149). In other words, actants do not exist before intra-actions, and only come to be understood as such through what Barad terms an "agential cut" – that is, the isolation of an actant within the process of the intra-action of which it is a part. Intra-actions, as the transformative power that produces and shapes the given actants, replaces the concept of interactions, because, by this understanding, there are no determined, independent entities preceding relations that can act between each other. As Linus de Petris and Anders Falk (2017) rightly pointed out when interpreting game(play) in Barad's terminology: "a gamer or a game is not made meaningful without the practice of gameplay".

This transformative power can manifest itself in various ways within the process of play, shaping the player and the video game object through the relation between them – from the player changing the game environment by collecting resources, eliminating enemies, solving riddles, and so on, to the improvement of her eye-hand coordination or the onset of repetitive strain injury due to the focused physical movement the game requires of her. Both of those are example of how the player and the game can shape each other materially – one cannot do it without the other. This can also happen on a more cognitive or symbolic level, when, during gameplay, we are transformed emotionally, by exposure to new experiences – for example, while

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playing socially and politically involved games, or when we are required to make difficult choices considering NPCs that we have already bonded with.

The main aim of this presentation is to explore different examples of such transformations, in order to better explain the consequences that the concept of intra-action has for our perception of the payer-game relation. One of the interesting examples of the phenomenon that will be analysed is glitch. I will argue that a glitch is not a feature or property of a given technological artefact (Menkman 2011; Krapp 2011), but is in fact only perceived as such in the context of the material discursive practice within which it is embroiled – which, in case of video game, is play. It is during gameplay, where the borders of both player and game are being shaped, that a glitch comes to life. The moment that a glitch manifests within the player-game intra-action, the shape of the boundaries shifts – the game object change its affordances and the visibility of its materiality (Janik 2017), and the player way they are exploring the game environment (Consalvo 2007, Meades 2015).

However, the glitch phenomenon emphasises another important aspect of Barad's intra-actions – the problem of agency. In her line of thought, if we cannot talk about the traditional division between subject and object, agency is not something that actants have and can use, but rather a dynamic force that happens between them (Petris de & Falk 2017). By not differentiating between human and non-human agency, Barad wants to escape the anthropocentric tendencies that can appear when using those terms in a traditional understanding. Therefore, we cannot called glitch "a manifestation of the pure agency of the video game", as Janik (2017) puts it, but rather a manifestation of the autonomy of the video game object, which leads us to the last area of interest of this presentation – the question of meaning.

Game autonomy points out to its otherness. Inspired by the works of Levinas and Derrida, Barad uses the intra-action idea to underline the ethical side of the connections between actants – which she understands in terms of equality and response-ability to others. What this means, in the context of play, is that human actants are not the only ones responsible for creating meaning within the intra-action. Non-human actants – including the game object as a whole – are co-creators of meaning. This is possible because of the autonomy actants gain when they have been isolated through the "agential cut," as well as the fact that meanings are created through specific material-discursive practices (Barad 2007, 148). Using, again, the example of a glitch, we can see that glitching can be given a variety of meanings by the human actants engaging with it – from humoresque responses (Švelch 2014), economical exploitation (Švelch 2015) and art curation (Apperley 2015), to the creation of a mythology within a community of play(Janik 2017). However, these meanings are only possible in the first place because of the materiality and presence of the game object. The glitch, that reshapes both – the game and the player – is in fact another example of the material-discursive practice through which the meaning is being created. As the (intra-)action, it becomes an act of communication, in which we start to see that we not only playing inside the game environment, but the game object becomes our partner in play.

Keywords

Intra-action, posthumanism, glitch, the player-game relationship, Karen Barad

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