

Materially Random Stories: Randomness and Narrative as Material Structures in Digital Games

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Keywords

randomness, Karen Barad, uncertainty, narrative experience, materiality

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Randomness in digital games is realized on many levels of the player's experience. The most common discussions regarding this phenomenon focus on the design of mechanics and functionalities based on uncertainty. As Costikyan (2013) claims, this is a common mechanism that keeps players interested in and engaged with the game. Uncertainty is not only restricted to the possibility of the appearance of a certain object or event in the game, but also, among others, to narrative anticipation, or to being unsure of our own abilities, as well as of other players' behaviour.

In recent years, we have witnessed the growing popularity of games that make uncertainty a focal point of their gameplay. Most of the research regarding this topic focuses on the mechanisms of so-called "loot boxes" and the ethical or legal implication of their influence on players (Nielsen & Grabarczyk, 2019; Xiao et al., 2022), on how to generate curiosity in players (To, et al. 2016) or on players' behaviour towards predicting the probability of gameplay outcomes (Gałka & Strzelecki, 2021). However, questions of uncertainty and randomness also touch upon areas such as procedurally created game space that would be unique to each player, as is the case in *No Man's Sky* (Hello Games, 2016), or even narrative, as is the case in *Middle-Earth: Shadow of Mordor* (Monolith Productions, 2014).

In this presentation, I would like to focus on the phenomenon of randomness and the feeling of uncertainty it creates regarding the narrative experience. I will focus not only on the narrative anticipation that is caused by randomness (to follow the types of uncertainty presented by Costikyan), but, in doing so, I would also like to explore the subject of the material nature of the narrative mechanisms in digital games.

In recent years, approaches to game experience have explore the question of materiality in a new direction. As the posthumanist approach has gathered strength in contemporary game studies, we can observe a rising interest in new materialist philosophy, especially the work of Karen Barad. Researchers such as McKeown (2018), Janik (2021), Sicart (2022) point out that the process of play has a material character, despite the game being a digital object. What makes it material is the very

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

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connection between player and the game that is created through the intra-action of play. This intra-action, then, is an example of a material-discursive practice that not only bonds entities, but also actively shapes their boundaries and qualities, materialize entities from a sea of phenomena. This requires rethinking, for example, the question of the role and place of agency in games, as well as the process of production of meaning in gameplay.

I shall focus on a particular idea that emerge in Karen Barad's work – the idea of the apparatus. Their approach builds upon Michel Foucault, but propose a more posthumanist approach rooted in agential realism, approach. Apparata, in Barad's philosophy, can be described as material-discursive practices, dynamic forces that “enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering” (Barad 2007, p. 148). They are a vital part of the process of materialisation. Thanks to them, phenomena gain distinct qualities and boundaries that can be explored by others. While reality as a whole is a sea of matter, requiring an agential cut to produce – or rather materialize – given phenomena, apparatuses determine what exactly emerges through the connection that was formulated by intra-actions. Moreover, they can change our perception of a phenomenon, change its status, and in this way also influence future events, affairs or discourses. What is also interesting is the fact that apparatuses are open-ended practices that can also be influenced. They are not something stable that simply exists in the world, but are also subjected to a material (re)configurations.

In the context of digital games, I would argue that randomness and mechanics based on randomness are an example of such an apparatus. In other words, randomness in games is a material-discursive practice – a practice that is rooted in materiality (in this case, the materiality of the gaming process) and that discursively gives this material meaningful structure. Out of multiple possibilities, it determines one given outcome with a specific meaning. This specific meaning emerges through discursive practices that are embedded in randomness mechanics.

In this presentation I shall explain this process using examples of randomness mechanisms that are used to produce narrative experiences in games. This will allow me not only to explain how fiction can be created by the materiality of the game, but also how it is possible to give the player the feeling of the uniqueness of the story, by emphasizing the liminal character of all the possible narrative outcomes. I will focus on three examples: the dice rolls mechanism in *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) that determines the outcomes of dialogue options and possible actions for the player character; the randomness of the generated space and in-game objects in *Returnal* (Housemarque, 2021) that presents a linear story as something unique for every player; and cards as the vehicle for the progression of the story in *Inscription* (Daniel Mullins Games, 2021). The chosen examples show different aspects of randomness' capacity for building narrative experiences, demonstrating the multiplicity of fiction in games. As apparatuses, these instances of randomness – have a transformative power over the game object and actively co-determine the story.

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