

Reframing Posthuman Agency through the Concept of Speed

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ABSTRACT

Agency has a long history of drawing the curiosity of game study scholars. But after years of development and critiques, the meaning of the term “agency” has become de-centered and divergent. I want to focus on the tension between the human-centered agency and non/post-human agency. Human agency is often articulated as an experience or the capability of acting (Mason 2021; Jørgensen 2003), while non/post-human agency often focuses on the agency of nonliving objects, tools and game characters (Jennings 2019; Keogh 2022; Chia 2022). I find this to be a productive difference that shows the need for a new theoretical grounding to bridge these differences.

I argue that all definitions of agency involve three different parts: **Suggestion**, **Intention** and **Transformation**. To take the definition of agency articulated by Murray and later developed further by Wardrip-Fruin as an example (Murray 2017; Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009): Suggestion is the representations and objects displayed in the game that imply certain relations outside of themselves (e.g., guns can shoot). Intention would be that of the player, conditioned by suggestions. Transformation means the material transformation of the system, causing it to change states. Finally, the transformation has to be perceived by the player through feedback, giving them the experience of agency.

The problem comes when one encounters other definitions of agency. I will term this **localization as premise**, where, depending on what objects the scholar is interested in, the localization of viewpoint conditions how suggestion, intention and transformation relate to each other. It is notable that different localizations also construct the active/passive dynamics differently. For example, Michael Mateas and Bettina Bódi define agency by localizing to the designer decisions and the game artifacts (Mateas 2001; Bódi 2023). Agency is mostly discussed in terms of suggestions (formal affordances) and transformations (material affordance/mechanics). Intention of the player thus becomes passive in this case. On the other hand, Tanenbaum et al. and Stang argue that player intention precedes suggestions, as the player has to actively participate in the meaning making of the software (Tanenbaum 2011; Stang 2019). A sociological approach argues that impersonal discourses predetermine the possibility of agency - suggestions as primary (Harrell and Zhu 2009), while Muriel et al., inspired by Actor Network Theory, argue that transformation is primary to suggestions and intentions as both living and nonliving entities are constantly acting on each other (Muriel and Crawford 2020). In conclusion, a new theoretical grounding is called for to explain this phenomena, not only in ways how one restricts oneself to certain causal mechanisms, but also how the subjective experiences of oneself are formed from this localization of attention.

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I introduce the theory of the subject proposed by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in their work *Anti-Oedipus* (Deleuze and Guattari 2009). They provide a coherent theory of subjectivity and the self that is constructed out of the push and pull of forces in the world. Subjectivity, in this view, is about claiming ownership to certain forces of the world and envisions itself as though those forces are caused by a unified decision maker, generating the impression of a private intention. This can explain many philosophical accounts of subjectivity that is essentially unstable and fluctuating by identifying itself with different drives within the human body, and also embodying non-human objects outside the body (Smith 2005; Keogh 2018).

I propose the concept of speed to help further articulate how such a subject can be constructed from moment to moment. I center my discussion of speed on the distinction between acceleration and deceleration. The key to this concept is Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of organization. In short, the condition of acceleration is defined as **when elements under consideration are in a determined relationship**, while the condition of deceleration is defined as **when the relationships between elements under considerations are yet to be determined**. A determined relationship means that elements are organized, connected together with determined functional roles. Under this situation, optimization or acceleration can take place. This is related to a process Deleuze terms *contraction*, which is necessary for contemplation and individuation (Deleuze 2014, 96). The concept of embodiment as described in Sudnow's *Pilgrim in the Microworld* is a prime example of a subject that is constructed from acceleration, or in an organization consisting of both human and nonhuman elements (Sudnow 1983). Sudnow details the way his eyes and hands have secret communication channels to connect themselves to the controller and the screen. An undetermined relationship means that the elements can change, shift around and make new connections. Deleuze and Guattari term this "speed and slowness", where elements are "deterritorialized", or "unformed", as in, a form/organization is not being imposed on the elements (Deleuze and Guattari 1988, 266). I use *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions 2020) as an example of the deceleration of terrain navigation, where each bump and dip needs player inputs, as opposed to many other games where differences in the terrain are smoothed over/accelerated on the side of the software. Another example of deceleration is Mike Cook's Puck, which deliberately generates contents slowly (Cook 2022). The slowness is an explicit deceleration from the widely accepted goal (a social organization) of content generation: "resource efficiency" and "high-end scalability"; As a result, *Puck* is designed to promote reflection by giving space for the user to re-evaluate their relationship with and their interpretation of the generated contents.

To synthesize both acceleration and deceleration together, I argue that agency has to consist of both the *foreground* and the *background*. The background is the site of acceleration (assumptions, abstractions, the extended body). The foreground is the site of deceleration, where one affects and manipulates the elements. This conceptualization allows the flexibility of shifting the background/assumptions and the foreground/attentions to evoke different modes of agency. Lastly, I propose the concept *fatigue* to argue that foreground/acceleration is necessary because one never comprehends everything at once (Deleuze 2014, 101).

Keywords

agency, speed, post-structuralism, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Baruch Spinoza

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