

Play as Apparatus and Ludic Asianness as Diffracted Realities

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

While most scholarly works in the field seem to be unable to escape the faith of assigning definitions to video games before commencing their analyses, I wish not to fall into the same loop of compiling a list of definite attributes nor excruciatingly comb through its genealogy all the way from *Tetris* to *League of Legends*. It is not due to the reason of negating the importance of doing so. Instead of tackling the reductive question of *what video games are*, my aim is to explore *how* video games come into existence—in an epistemic sense, not physical as in the production of games. This paper therefore argues that video games and players come into their epistemic existences through what Karen Barad identifies as “intra-action,” where it is only through the act of play that programs, codes, and audio-visual materials are transformed into “video games,” and those who perform the act of play into “players.”

Similar observations which highlight the symbiotic relationship between the game and the player have indeed been made by Sal Humphreys (2005) and Mia Consalvo (2009). The former emphasises the creative capacity of players that play as an engagement can create text, while the latter asserts that “games are created through the act of gameplay, which is contingent on acts by players.” Carly Kocurek (2018) also recognizes play as not only an action but a means of interacting. Nevertheless, I would further develop these arguments with Barad’s account to uphold the ontologically inseparability of games and players. The relationship between video games and players is not merely bidirectional but also *intra-determinate*—a video game is designed to be engaged by the player through the act of play as it constitutes the player identity. Kocurek might have identified play as a means of interaction, but interaction takes place between individually determinate entities, which video games and players *are not*. And hence, I would dissent from these previous arguments which presume the “player” as a completed, separated entity from the game, pre-existing the act of play. The player existence and identity shall also be contingent on the game and the act of play as much as the game is contingent on the player and the act of play.

With reference to Barad’s Agential Realism (2007), I aim to further establish the understanding of the act of play as “apparatus,” which provide the conditions for the

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possibility of determinate boundaries for both “video games” and “players,” and thus games as “phenomena,” the ontological inseparability of the inter-acting apparatus and objects (from screens and controllers to programs and codes). In this sense, game worlds and game narratives are not mere representations but *diffracted realities*. Barad, who borrows from Donna Haraway, adopts “diffraction” rather than “reflection” as her methodology since the former attends to the patterns of difference while the latter concerns mirroring and thus creates the illusion of fixed positions and the fixation on the disjunct domains of words and things. To Barad, diffraction patterns help illuminate how determinate boundaries are configured and reconfigured in the entanglements. I therefore intend to trace the diffraction patterns within the game-phenomena, the diffracted realities that constitute the game-phenomena—in which different entangled identities and agencies become determinate in different game-phenomena.

Nonetheless, this paper will focus on ludic race, or ludic Asianness in particular, to exemplify how an entangled identity (and agency) is configured and reconfigured in four selected games. These games are set in East Asia but not all produced by local developers—namely *Kowloon’s Gate* (Zeque 1997), *Sleeping Dogs* (United Front Games 2012), *Detention* (Red Candle Games 2017), and *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions 2020). My understanding of “ludic Asianness” stems from Christopher B. Patterson (2018)’s idea where ludic race emancipates non-Asian players from their fixed identities and locales to inhabit “Asianness” as a form of virtual identity tourism. And so, the formation and consumption of “Digital Asia” in the four video games allow players to claim this ludic Asianness through authentic engagements with Asian traumatic past and repetitive integrations of Asian everyday life. For instance, *Detention* and *Ghost of Tsushima* serve as historical reimaginations to invite a restorative and nostalgic gaze, while *Kowloon’s Gate* and *Sleeping Dogs* canonise “Asian” experience by serialising popular cultural elements and tropes from existing media productions as well as by repetitively integrating players into Digital Asia through mundane tasks. From which, we can then see that ludic Asianness is not intrinsic for players to claim as they enter the game world. It is the ludic design which gradually interpellates players to engage with the game world as the Asian protagonists, and thus game developers also has a crucial role to play in such entanglements.

A video game is not produced as a closed circuit but designed to be intervened by the act of play—which is, the player transforms codes, narratives, and audiovisual materials into a meaningful ludic experience (Digital Asia) through the act of play as the ludic experience constitutes the player identity (ludic Asianness) in return. In short, instead of debating on the absolute criteria which constitute “Asian games” such as the production locales, developer’s cultural backgrounds, or game settings, I propose that we shall re-examine the epistemic existence of ludic race, alongside with those of video game and player.

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