Designing Hybrid Agency: AI–Mech Collaboration in Contemporary Mecha Games

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ABSTRACT

Game AI has taken many forms, from enemy routines and scripted companions to background systems that coordinate navigation, combat, and encounter pacing. Yet relatively few games position AI as a co-acting subject whose decisions directly shape the player's possibilities. This research examines how contemporary mecha games develop this model by embedding AI into the machines players inhabit. It argues that these games construct AI–mech units as sites of hybrid agency in which initiative, responsibility, and risk circulate across human and non-human actors through rules, automation thresholds, and representational cues.

The analysis focuses on three titles that take AI–mech relations as a core design problem—*Titanfall 2* (Respawn 2016), *Daemon X Machina* (Marvelous 2019), and *BattleTech* (Harebrained Schemes 2018). Together they span first-person shooting, third-person mech action, and turn-based tactics, but in each case, play depends on collaboration between a human pilot and a semi-autonomous war machine. Gameplay sequences, combat systems, assist functions, scripted interventions, and UI messaging are examined alongside paratexts such as fan wikis and community guides.

These materials are read through a framework that combines actor–network–theory's account of heterogeneous agency distributed across human and non-human actants (Latour 2005), Haraway's cyborg figuration as a way of conceptualizing hybrid, composite subjects (Haraway 1991), and Braidotti's posthuman ethics, which foregrounds more-than-human, relational forms of agency and responsibility (Braidotti 2013). Bogost's notion of procedural rhetoric (2007) supplements this by treating rules, parameters, and automation thresholds as claims about how humans and machines ought to share initiative.

Across these cases, recurring design concerns emerge, even though each game realizes them through different mechanics. One concern is how initiative moves between pilot and machine. In a first-person context, this appears as moments when

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a mech takes over movement, executes a scripted rescue, or supplements player aim with targeting assistance; in the action title, it emerges through automated follow-ups, autonomous weapons, and systems that temporarily narrow or expand what the player can do; in the tactics game, initiative is reallocated more quietly through turn order, accuracy calculations, and thresholds that force retreat, shutdown, or ejection. A second concern is how these handovers are made legible and open to judgement. Voice protocols, mech animation, interface alerts, and patterns of damage feedback frame similar mechanical operations—as override, protection, error correction, or sacrifice—so that players learn to read system-driven interventions not just as neutral computations but as situated acts. A third concern is how genre-specific systems stabilize expectations about the balance between human and machine: high-mobility movement chains in the shooter, build and resource management in the mech action game, and heat, armour, and stability economies in the tactics game assign different default roles to the AI partner, from vigilant guardian to demanding collaborator to procedural representation of risk.

This pattern suggests that AI in these games is neither a neutral tool nor an autonomous villain, but a situated collaborator whose authority is tightly bound to context. AI–mech units do not simply execute predefined routines; they also redistribute control, expose or buffer the pilot against risk, and at times unilaterally close down options in order to satisfy system parameters. Seen in this light, the games operate as small-scale experiments in how far responsibility and tactical judgement can be delegated to computational agents without dissolving the fiction of player control, and in how much agency can be reclaimed by players who remain subject to automation. The shifting roles of these AI partners bring into focus familiar tensions in current debates on automation and AI in games: anxieties about being overruled or sidelined by system-driven interventions, and hopes that intelligent collaborators can absorb danger, handle complexity, and open up new forms of moment-to-moment play.

The research makes three main contributions. Conceptually, it develops hybrid agency as a tool for describing how digital games distribute action, obligation, and vulnerability between players and AI in rules and systems, rather than addressing AI only as a narrative motif or industrial buzzword. Analytically, it outlines a way of operationalizing posthuman and science-and-technology studies approaches in game analysis by following concrete handovers of control, risk, and decision-making across missions, encounters, and interfaces. Empirically, it brings together three mecha titles that are seldom discussed together to map a specific design space in which AI companions are neither invisible infrastructure nor fully independent characters, but procedural partners whose shifting roles stage contemporary questions about how humans and intelligent machines might act together.

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