

## Agency and the Free Will debate.

### ABSTRACT

This paper will take a close look of the term *agency* in Game Studies, identifying how it is presently used (on those occasions when it is) and suggesting how it could be used more cogently. Like so many terms in Game Studies - narrative and immersion as two of the more prominent examples – any author seeking to use the term has first to define it, resulting in a general avoidance of its use.

Agency is often seen as a synonym for interactivity, but this paper will argue that agency is more than that, requiring some further level of player empowerment beyond the mere act of manipulating an interface to control a presence in a gamespace.

The author has previously presented papers, and published on, this subject but has generally missed this formative stage in discussion, where an exploration of the core meaning of the term is undertaken.

In philosophy, agency implies some form of agent; to be an agent, one must have free will. Following such a line of argument ultimately removes the debate from the field of game studies, and ends up in a discussion as to whether a person has free will in general, rather than if they can act as an agent in a gaming context. The purpose of this paper is not to focus on the behavior of a game player, but rather to look at what action a game may allow and when and if that action could be usefully described as agency.

The paper applies contemporary philosophical theory to games, working under the assumption that the player can be treated as an agent, but simultaneously critiquing that assumption in order to further illustrate the complexity of the subject. The history of the free will debate is not touched on, as it is too extensive for a paper of this size and contemporary theory is a distillation of that which has gone before. The four core theoretical standpoints of the debate (determinism, compatibilism, incompatibilism and libertarian incompatibilism) are briefly explained, and then applied to games, treating the game as if it were a microcosm, in order to see how they might engender a wider understanding of the level of independence and empowerment possible in player action.

Determinism argues that all human action is a result of prior cause. Taking a structuralist standpoint, in the context of a game it is often possible to see if a particular event is a direct and unavoidable result of a previous event and, in so doing, clearly see if the game is determinist, although it

being determinist does not necessarily mean there is no free will in a wider context. Knowing for sure that something is determined is not a privileged we have when dealing with the world outside of the microcosm of a game, and as such, determinist theories can tell us a lot about games, and applying them to game might allow us to more fully understand determinism in a wider context.

For the purposes of better understanding games in particular, the paper suggests we can treat a player as being an agent, of being Aristotle's 'mover unmoved', and in so doing illuminate the way player and game interact. By doing this, we However, some caution needs to be used, as the game itself will act as a cause upon the player and, where that cause has an unavoidable effect, any possibility of agency is removed -although the possibility of agency being present in a wider context, or of being impossible in that wider context, always remains.

By narrowing the frame of reference, by making the player the first cause (unless the game has acted upon them) it is possible to see where a player *might* have agency. This narrowing also allows for the analysis of free will by detailed example, which may in turn help a wider understanding of the concept, even though my perspective is very game centric. I conclude that agency is a valid term for use in Game Studies, though has a particular nuance within this context as it indicates the *potential* for free action, not necessarily its presence.

### Author Keywords

Free will, agency, determinism.

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