

## 5 Intra-active Play

“What can be studied is always a relationship or an infinite regress of relationships. Never a ‘thing.’”<sup>1</sup>

Gregory Bateson

The screen flickers with warm, fluorescent shades of yellow, orange, and red. My palms cling to the soft plastic curves of the controller, thumbs swaying in a semiautomatic dance. The sound of branches cracking in the heat heralds my travel through the virtual woods. The Shoshone National Forest is being consumed by wildfire while I attempt to safely maneuver Henry to the helicopter. With persistence, I turn the tiny joysticks in pirouettes, but the figure on the screen does not move an inch. My fingers mash the buttons in increasing exasperation to no avail. The game does not seem to care. The game world floats in a trancelike state of ambience, as if waiting patiently for me to act on it, but I can't.<sup>2</sup> Soon, I discover the rather mundane reason for this frustrating moment in the final minutes of *Firewatch* (2006) (figures 5.1 and 5.2): my controller's battery has run out. For a moment, the relationship I had taken for granted between me and the game repolarizes itself.<sup>3</sup> And with that repolarization comes the old, unresolved question: Where does the subject (player) end and the object (game) begin?<sup>4</sup>

In opening this chapter with the above gameplay scenario, I would like to posit a somewhat controversial proposition: that players and games as such do not exist—or, at least, not in the sense we're used to. Neither players nor games can be seen as clear-cut, pre-defined entities, preceding and existing before the moment of play. Only through and within play do



Figure 5.1



Figure 5.2

Screenshots from *Firewatch* (2016). Courtesy of Campo Santo.

both unfold in a mutual ludic embrace. And although at the first glance the boundaries may seem obvious, they do not remain stationary. Players and games are not individual entities separated by predefined sharp edges; theirs is not a “static relationality but a doing—the enactment of boundaries.”<sup>5</sup> To challenge the prevalent patterns of thinking about video gaming and digital play, I argue that we need to take a performative turn. Karen Barad’s philosophy of agential realism provides a perfect framework to do that.

Along with Barad's performative perspective comes a major ontological shift, one that stands in opposition to Cartesian dualism (or Cartesian cut), which was founded on the distinction between the "internal" mind and the "external" matter. The division has become so entrenched within Western imagination that it is seen today as pure common sense. The predominant popular and scholarly understanding of video games has been also very much influenced by Cartesian thinking. Consider the foundational splits between hardware and software or the visual and the computational.<sup>6</sup> A computer game's core<sup>7</sup> is usually understood as that which is algorithmic, procedural, mechanical, and, at the very least, rule-based, whereas the visual and narrative components are seen as ornamental outer layers.<sup>8</sup> This juxtaposition of rule-based systems against fictional worlds appears in early foundational texts devoted to games, one of which sees Jesper Juul looking for the heart of gameness.<sup>9</sup> In his attempt to provide a medium-free (or what he calls "transmedial") definition of computer games, Juul dubs the computational processing of data as immaterial.<sup>10</sup> He envisions the material as something visible to the eye and physically tangible (e.g., material devices such as projectors and controllers). Data computation, on the other hand, is regarded by Juul as the hidden "thinking" process and thus interpreted as an immaterial core of computer gaming.

Many theories have been caught up in the Cartesian trap.<sup>11</sup> Also interactivity is strongly embedded in Cartesianism. It presupposes two separate entities—players and games—interacting with each other. However, as this chapter will show, it is not necessarily the case. Leaning on Barad's ontological framework, I want to move away from interaction towards *intra-action* that is from a symmetrical action flow exerted by the human player on the game or the gaming apparatus to a fluid entanglement of forces. Let me express it more bluntly—video games have never been interactive. Interactivity as a concept has been simply taken at face value, a foundational problem I address in the second chapter. But, as Barad rather succinctly puts it, "it takes a healthy skepticism toward Cartesian doubt" to see an alternative.<sup>12</sup> So, let's get skeptical.

### **Agential Realism: Boundaries Do Not Sit Still**

Agential realism stands at a crossroads between the physico-philosophy of the physicist Niels Bohr<sup>13</sup> and the feminist performative philosophies of Donna

Haraway and Judith Butler. It could also be placed in a long line of other theoretical approaches and heterogeneous discursive fields contributing to the “material turn,” such as actor–network theory,<sup>14</sup> the *dispositif*,<sup>15</sup> interdisciplinary perspectives developed under the broad banner of “the ecology of mind,”<sup>16</sup> and new materialism and posthumanism.<sup>17</sup> Although grounded in different disciplines, supported by diverse methodologies, and often developed within divergent sociopolitical and cultural contexts, all of the above thought movements, methods, and theoretical approaches have one thing in common: they challenge the Western anthropocentric position of the human in the world. The human is no longer a central agent but part of a complex network of agencies, human and nonhuman alike, and matter is no longer seen as “dead.” It is not simply acted on; it becomes an integral part of any act. Matter is a meeting point of material and discursive acts. As Barad says, “it is vitally important that we understand how matter matters.”<sup>18</sup>

To navigate through this complex material field, let us start with the already introduced Cartesian cut, responsible for an inherent distinction between subject and object. This division produced a figure well known to positivist science: that of an objective human observer setting up a material apparatus that is regarded as external to the very object that is being observed. In other words, the object is viewed as something existing independently of the action of its observation. It does not influence the observer and, unless desired, is not influenced by the act of observation. This commonsense belief in the scientific processes of observation and measurement was challenged in the 1920s by Niels Bohr, a proponent of the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics. As opposed to the well-established Newtonian physics, quantum physics makes it impossible to decouple the act of observation from that which is observed. Let me illustrate this highly abstract reasoning with the famous double-slit experiment.

According to classical physics, the world is composed of two types of entities: particles and waves. Particles as localized entities occupy a certain place in space and time and therefore cannot be in two places at once. Waves, by contrast, behave very differently. They overlap with one another, a phenomenon understood by anyone who has ever observed the way water behaves.<sup>19</sup> From an ontological perspective, those two entities could not be more contradictory. The double-slit experiment, first conducted in 1801 by Thomas Young, is meant to determine whether an electron sent

through two slits emerges as a particle or as a wave. If it is composed of particles, the particles will form a scatter pattern on the other side of the slits. If it is a wave, the slit will produce interfering, overlapping circles known as a diffraction pattern. The experiment demonstrated that electrons sent through the double-slit as particles emerge to display diffraction patterns characteristic of waves.

Niels Bohr interpreted this contradictory state by arguing for the inseparability of the apparatus of measurement and the observed object in his principle of complementarity, which states that objects have mutually exclusive properties that cannot be measured simultaneously. For example, depending on the experimental framework—that is, the conditions under which it is being observed—light, as the double-slit experiment shows, is both a wave and a stream of particles. For Bohr, this perplexing duality of “neither-nor” provided an ontological insight into the ambiguity of nature itself.<sup>20</sup> His was a highly revolutionary assumption at the time, undermining the classical understanding of the properties of light. We could go even further in saying that Bohr’s interpretation shook the foundations on which science and natural philosophy rested.

The key ontological takeaway from this experiment in quantum physics is that independent objects with measurable attributes do not exist prior to and outside of measurement: “There are no things before the measurement, and . . . the very act of measurement produces determinate boundaries and properties of things.”<sup>21</sup> Objects, therefore, cannot be taken for granted as objective referents. What we are able to observe or catch in the moment are phenomena; in the case of the experiment described here, the *intra-action* of an electron with a concrete apparatus. According to such a perspective, the ontological change of the electron alongside the change of the apparatus should not come as surprise. What is being measured is not an independent electron but a phenomenon in the making.

The world of quantum physics experiments and indeterminate ontologies of electrons seems very remote from what we observe in our daily lives or gaming sessions. The question, then, is: How do we adapt the particle-wave dualism to the human experience? This is where Karen Barad begins their journey with the philosophy of agential realism—with ambiguity and the paradox of mutual exclusivity on the human level. Quantum physics helps Barad contextualize their own ethico-onto-epistemological position towards the world. They ground their performative feminist philosophy in

matter; to be more precise, in a particular interpretation of what matter is and how it comes to matter. Following into the footsteps of quantum physics, Barad sees matter as a dynamic articulation of the world—matter is *of the world* as opposed to *in the world*. It is “an active participant in the world’s becoming, in its ongoing ‘intra-activity.’”<sup>22</sup>

Barad’s philosophy, then, questions the main assumption of social liberal theories and representationalism, according to which the world is composed of individuals (indivisible units), each of which has a set of attributes that preexist their cultural representation. According to such an ontological order, the entities exist independently of any representation or action in which they might take part. In accordance with representationalism, for instance, scientific knowledge (whether it takes the form of theoretical concepts, graphs, mathematical equations, or photographs) simply mediates access to the material world.<sup>23</sup> This world exists independently from the observer and the apparatus used to observe it. Representationalism, Barad writes, is a Cartesian habit of mind—a belief in the division between that which is internal and that which is external. In effect, what Barad proposes is a philosophical position that denies “that there are representations on the one hand and ontologically separate entities awaiting representation on the other.”<sup>24</sup> Barad entreats us to move toward a performative understanding of the world that is not built out of external entities but rather one that is constantly doing and becoming—a world that is *worlding*.<sup>25</sup>

Agential realism is a philosophy based on a relational ontology, one that shies away from the geometries and binary oppositions according to which a human is either a pure effect or a pure cause. It rejects the atomistic worldview in which individual entities with inherent properties preexist actions. It questions the existence of *relata* before relations. Things are no longer basic ontological entities. Barad’s is not a story of fixed Cartesian cuts between preexisting entities or agents but an intervention into the very premise on which agency rests. The distinction between the subject or agent and the object is not fixed. It may change depending on where an *agential cut* is placed.<sup>26</sup> Think about our initial anecdotal example of a game controller that ran out of power. In an agential realist reading, we do not start the game with separate interacting entities (a human player exercising their agency over a game via a nonhuman game controller); instead we look at how subjects and objects emerge through concrete intra-actions—how they come to exist in local situational contexts that may vary depending

on the experimental (or the ludic) apparatus. In the case of *Firewatch*, the power cut literally denotes the agential cut. In the moment of the power cut, I was deprived of my perceived agential power over the object of play; I was no longer the acting subject within the player–game constellation.

### Baradian Philosophy and Posthumanism at Play

Karen Barad is not entirely unknown to games scholarship. In the last few years, a handful of publications and conference papers have featured the philosophy of agential realism within the context of games and playful practices.

Justyna Janik, for instance, works with the concept of intra-action to discuss video game glitches (short-lived faults in the digital system) as manifestations of the agency of the video game.<sup>27</sup> Much like the agential power cut I experienced while playing *Firewatch*, Janik argues that glitches bring the player's attention to the resistant nature of the video game object. Janik also complements Barad's perspective with the concept of the "bio-object," introduced in 1970s by the Polish theater artist Tadeusz Kantor. For Kantor, the bio-object manifests itself as a symbiosis of human and nonhuman elements. This perspective allowed him to break the usual anthropocentric hierarchy by placing the live actor and the inanimate object on the same dramaturgical level.<sup>28</sup> Janik uses Kantor's theory to rethink the player–game relation, suggesting an equal ontological status between human and non-human actants at play.

Conor Mckeown, on the other hand, applies Barad's philosophy to the analysis of software as an entangled phenomenon. Rather than seeing it as a materially grounded, solidly coded infrastructure, he emphasizes its performative and "gaseous" dimension. In one of his writings, Mckeown discusses the practice of the "code injection," an artistic ludic intervention of SethBling, who literally "injected" and executed the code of the mobile game *Flappy Bird* (2013) into *Super Mario World* (1990), transforming one game into another through play.<sup>29</sup>

Although Baradian intra-action has remained a niche subject existing at the very borderlands of video game aesthetic, the overarching philosophical movement of posthumanism and the associated concept of nonanthropocentrism appears much more often in the study of games. One of the first analyses of nonhuman agency in video gaming appears in the work

of Seth Giddings, who as early as in 2005 theorized the so-called technological agency against the backdrop of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory and Donna Haraway's figurative cyborg.<sup>30</sup> In her extensive monograph work on the ecological dimension of gaming and play, Alenda Y. Chang devotes an entire chapter to the nonhuman, problematizing the status of human agency alongside her concept of the "bit-narrative," a playful and new-materialist derivation of the eighteenth-century "it-narrative," a genre in literature also referred to as the "nonhuman autobiography"—one told from the perspective of an object or animal. As Chang argues, "Bit-narrative games like *The Novelist* (2013), *Mountain* (2014), and Paolo Pedercini's satirical *Phone Story* (2011) offer metaphysical speculation about the lives of inanimate objects."<sup>31</sup> Chang sees them as playable experiments in nonhuman alterity and agency. Jan Stasiński, a media theorist perhaps somewhat lesser known to the Anglophone scholarly community, conducted a post-human analysis of video games in his 2015 monograph, newly published in English under the title *Media Technologies and Posthuman Intimacy* (2021).<sup>32</sup> Paolo Ruffino, in his more recent writings, also grapples with the ideas of nonhuman games, pleading for a rerouting of gaming and game studies from false myths of agency and interactivity toward narratives of nonhuman companionship and earthly survival in the post-Anthropocene.<sup>33</sup>

Criticism of anthropocentrism and the Cartesian subject-object divide also appears in the recent work of Frans Mäyrä on the hybridization of the player's agency. He reinvestigates what it means to act as a player within a wider cultural context of digital technology. For Mäyrä, a human player is a hybrid, "a particular compound version of subjectivity that emerges from involvement with the contents, cultures and technologies of games."<sup>34</sup> Although his research is embedded in the philosophy of technology and cultural studies, the foundational questions about the relationship between human and information technology (in this context, players and gaming infrastructures) share a lot of common ground with posthuman theories. Mäyrä's inquiry into hybrid cultural agency rests on a large body of interdisciplinary work problematizing the exclusivity of human operations and reaching out into the realm of machines, networks, and complex systems.

The above examples by no means exhaust an entire body of games-related posthuman scholarly work. They are, however, an accurate indication of diverse and changing perspectives on nonhuman agency at play. Since my work in this chapter is embedded within a specific concept from



Barad's philosophical repertoire, I will now move on to explore a possible reading of what I call *intra-active play*.

### Ludic Apparatuses and Ludic Entanglements

Video gaming is a particularly fascinating ground on which to test Barad's theory of agential realism because games—at least in their computerized form—share a lot of similarities with measurement apparatuses. As we play, we leave behind huge amounts of raw data. And because play takes place within a staged, encoded environment, each of our moves can be potentially recorded and extracted for later analysis. In this context, a game becomes part of a larger apparatus calibrated to “pin down” play through the use of numbers, graphs, and patterns. Let us have a look at a specific field, which illustrates the crossover between agential realism and gaming analytics.

Game analytics rely heavily on telemetry, game metrics, and data visualization to assist developers in understanding player movement and behavioral patterns. Telemetry enables remote collection of data, eliminating the need for players to be in the same physical space as the analysts who are observing their engagement. Game analytics, then, may be understood as both a technology and a method that measures play over distance. We could also risk a hypothesis that an analytics-driven measurement tool is actually an optimization tool, used primarily to influence the players' future behavior by adjusting the game to maximize the time and money invested in and spent in the game. It is perhaps for this reason that the source of telemetry most strongly represented in current game development is user telemetry, or data on the behavior of players; for example, on their interaction with games, purchasing behavior, physical movement, or interaction with other users or applications.<sup>35</sup> This type of data is stored in various database formats, which in turn make it possible to transform raw data into interpretable data—game metrics. Examples of interpretable data may include average completion time as a function of individual game levels, average weekly bug fix rate, revenue per day, number of daily active users, or the points in time and levels where players tend to disengage.<sup>36</sup> This type of measurable data is usually interpreted and represented in the form of diverse visualizations, graphs, charts, and heat maps. The latter, for example, use colors to indicate the frequency of a variable occurring

across the map. The colors usually indicate a temperature scale that ranges from shades of blue (low rates of occurrence) to shades of red (high levels of occurrence). In video games, heat maps are often used to depict the frequency of player character deaths in the first- and third-person-shooter genres.

Let's dive into a case study to see what it means to place an *agential cut* within a concrete game analytics apparatus. Figure 5.3 shows a demo version of the dashboard, which gives an overview of the different performance indicators within a game analytics tool. The players and play patterns are segmented according to set characteristics, such as new incoming players or active players, or they can be sorted by values such as player retention (daily, weekly, etc.). It is also possible to view the number of players who are conducting monetary transactions within the game. We can compare the action of selecting a particular slice of data to performing an agential cut. The cut changes the lens through which we study the selected slice of data. Looking at in-game performance means focusing on user counts (daily, weekly, monthly), session counts, number of return visits to the game, and the number of players who have dropped out (i.e., discontinued playing that game). We can also focus on level-specific questions, including how users play and progress through each level, how many quests are completed, and how many users actually complete each level. The image of gameplay changes depending on what data we choose to examine.

A data-driven gameplay analysis not only reveals play patterns in real-time but, more importantly, it also determines certain behaviors and precludes others. Game analytics can be seen as a metronome that marks desired rhythms of play rather than an exclusively objective scientific apparatus that unobtrusively watches over the player's shoulder. According to such an interpretation, gameplay data is not only a by-product of human action but also an agent at play that contributes to the reinforcement of those game design patterns, which are able to regulate the player's behavior in a desired fashion. This is where game analytics meets agential realism. Think of the apparatus we discussed in the previous sections in relation to quantum physics. An experimental set-up was supposed to measure the behavior of a particle and determine its unquestionable nature; instead, it ended up coproducing the very phenomenon it was supposed to capture. As Niels Bohr argued, it is not possible to perform an a priori interpretation

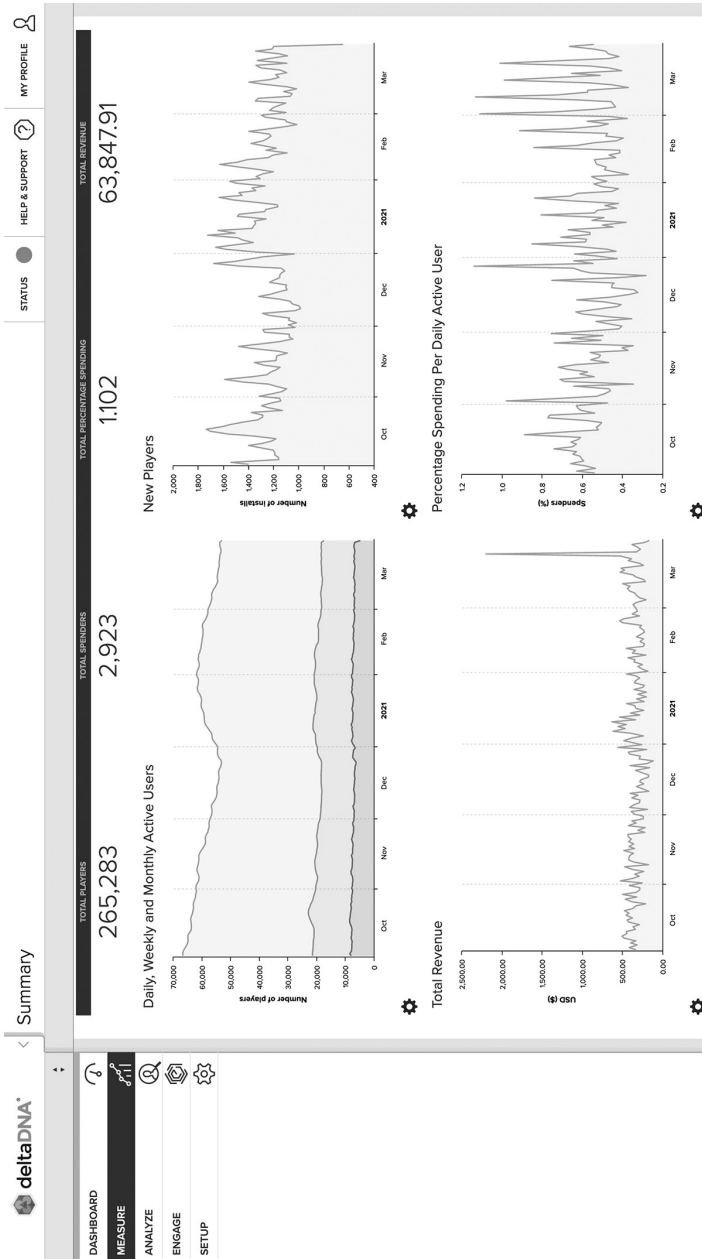


Figure 5.3

An exemplary dashboard in deltaDNA's game analytics platform.

of the nature of a particle.<sup>37</sup> In other words, there is a complex entanglement between an experiment's design and what it is measuring.

That digital play is entangled with the logic of computing and, what's more, shaped by precise scientific dispositives of its time should come as no surprise. In one of the first media historical studies on digital play, we find out that the computer emerges as a device for measuring its users: "It produces and stores knowledge about its players in the form of data."<sup>38</sup> This measurement tradition in video gaming dates back to late nineteenth-century experiments in behavioral psychology, which adapted a contemporary medium—the telegraph button—to measure human reaction times. Reaction time was understood as the initiation of a particular process at a set point in time in response to a specific visible phenomenon. The telegraph button, however, not only measured reactions but also trained study participants within the parameters of a very specifically mediated set-up. This measurement-centered logic behind the study of human behavior in combination with modern management techniques and, later, the science of regulatory computer systems (cybernetics) laid ground for the contemporary data-driven analysis of gameplay.<sup>39</sup> Games, especially in the mobile freemium sector, are regulative and regulating systems. As much as we play them, they also play us.<sup>40</sup>

### Resolving Ontological Ambiguities at Play

Agential cuts are also placed by diverse disciplines that examine the same object from entirely different perspectives. How play and games are perceived depends on the observer and on the apparatus of observation for their discipline. Perhaps this is why, despite hundreds of years of intellectual preoccupation with play, the subject does not seem to have been fully exhausted. In one of his last critical pieces on play, Brian Sutton-Smith summarizes this puzzling situation in the following words:

Since I first began reflecting on the nature of play and games in 1942, I have authored or coauthored, edited, or coedited, fifty books or so on these subjects. And during those sixty-five (and some) years, I thought time and again I had at last discovered the meaning of play. But, somehow, it always turned out otherwise, somehow there always seemed other questions to ask, other lines of inquiry to follow, all auguring answers more promising than those I thought I had in hand. Something about the nature of play itself frustrates fixed meaning.<sup>41</sup>

Play, then, is a bit like an unruly electron that keeps escaping its fixed position. Theoretical explanations can barely pin it down. Games take on different ontological shapes, depending on how we measure them and what we are looking for. In the following paragraphs I will explore how Baradian perspective resonates with the existing ontological debates around games.

This conundrum is well known in the interdisciplinary field of game studies, which in its early formative years made multiple attempts to capture and frame video games. Binding definitions were supposed to sharpen the disciplinary boundaries and equip scholars with schemas and models necessary to analyze video games in a rigorous, systematic, and predictable way.<sup>42</sup> Most of those models introduce dimensions, levels, and formal categorizations of all kind.<sup>43</sup> All of the attempts to create clear-cut models for the analysis of games can be viewed as attempts to set up an objective framework to contain the aesthetic value and experience of play. This construct assumes that the player-researcher engages in a more or less non-intrusive way with the object of their analysis.

The continual grappling with the capricious or elusive<sup>44</sup> nature of play has led to a recent attempt to establish a meta-ontology broad enough to address the impossibility of a single viable definition of what a game is. Roughly twenty years after the establishment of game studies, a project called “Making Sense of Games” was established to find a common denominator in this knotty equation. It has taken us two decades in game studies alone to come to the conclusion that a single definition or a model cannot possibly capture what a game is. Espen Aarseth proposes a game ontology that could model differences between and among things we call games.<sup>45</sup> As promising as such a “differential” ontology may seem, it seems to fall into the same problematic Cartesian trap addressed at the beginning of this chapter. The meta-model looks at games as mechanisms: objects, things, and items. It also makes a differentiation between the physical (platform, hardware, behavior) and the mental layer (phenomenal, conceptual, social). The real ontological question, however, is not that of *scope* (looking for the solution in an ontology that is broad enough to integrate all kinds of objects, behaviors, and practices) but that of *relationality*. As Gregory Bateson famously wrote, “What can be studied is always a relationship or an infinite regress of relationships. Never a ‘thing.’”<sup>46</sup> Defining a game object as one built out of mechanics and semiotics and founding a

meta-ontology on the differentiation between the physical and the mental leads us time and again towards the old Cartesian trap.

Baradian relational ontology cuts this Cartesian vicious circle *together/apart*.<sup>47</sup> In a Baradian sense, the game object and the gaming subject result from and at (game)play, and their edges can only be defined in a concrete gaming situation, never beforehand. A game object is not a representationalist one. The game world (semiotics) does not reflect an objective game mechanic (structure). Both are entangled in complex ways and influence one another in a material-discursive agential act. In that sense, semiotics is material (or structural) and matter (or structure) is discursive. By engaging with Barad's philosophy, we have a chance to reposition the understanding of (computerized) play from an atomistic and representationalist system to a performative process of ludic becoming. Games, then, are not mechanisms but rather phenomena in the making.

In Baradian philosophy, subjects and objects remain ambiguous, and ambiguities cannot be solved by formal frameworks and models: "The ambiguity is only temporarily, contextually decided, and therefore descriptive characterizations do not signify properties of abstract objects or observation-independent beings, but rather describe the between of our intra-action as it is marked by particular constructed delineations."<sup>48</sup> Barad's philosophy is helpful in expanding the question of the ambiguity of play, adding an epistemo-ontological foundation to the rhetorical dimension of play.<sup>49</sup> Agential realism can be also understood as an attempt "to provide a consistent reading within the context of particular ways of resolving ambiguities."<sup>50</sup> To see play and video games in a Baradian way is to reject classical epistemologies and ontologies and to accept that "borders are not fixed" (or preset to emphasize a computer-native discourse). A video game is not a complete object but a ludic apparatus shaped by human and nonhuman open-ended practices.

This becoming of a video game happens across different dimensions and, depending on the focus, a very different "game" unfolds before our eyes and under our palms. A video game is composed of a complex network of interdependencies. Once we look into the whole picture, it is less shocking to say that a game as such does not exist; if it does, it is only possible to grasp it in its concrete realization in combination with a local context of play. A video game is usually presented as a neatly packaged digital entertainment system with a certain set of mechanics and usually a distinct

graphical style. That, however, is only a partial story. The contours of a video game may play out quite differently from new, diverse perspectives. A game, therefore, is a truly transformative and transforming phenomenon, a “mutual constitution of entangled agencies.”<sup>51</sup>

### The Muddle of Play

My story of play as an entanglement of intra-acting forces begins with a quotation from Gregory Bateson and perhaps somewhat ironically ends with/in a Batesonian muddle. “Daddy, why do things get in a muddle?,” asks a curious daughter in an imaginary dialogue, to which a father figure replies: “What do you mean? Things? Muddle?” This exchange poses a fundamental question about the existence of preconstituted things that can get muddled in the first place. “Perhaps, in some sense, the muddle precedes the things,” Darshana Jayemanne writes in the opening chapter of *Performativity in Art, Literature, and Videogames*, which aims to look at video games not as things, objects, or framed worlds but rather as spaces of multiple possibilities performed by both human and machine actors.<sup>52</sup> Bateson’s earthy metaphor muddies the clear waters of positivism, rejecting the worldview of binary divisions and clear-cut boundaries. Just like Bateson’s muddy ecology of mind and Jayemanne’s performative multiplicities, Barad’s philosophy intertwines a vast ecology of agencies.

An agential realist reading of computer-mediated play shies away from a cybernetic understanding of play as a symmetrical communication between clear-cut entities—humans on one end of the communication channel and computers on the other. Play is not seen as a one-way process whereby the human player exercises their agency over the game object. It is rather that which emerges out of intra-actions among human and nonhuman entities: players, hardware, software, sets of rules and representations, material practices, and ethical circumstances. Play is a material-discursive practice of active configuration and reconfiguration. What is at play is constantly negotiated; it is not set in (game) stone.

This configurability of digital play is not tied solely to procedurality or the ability of video games to generate branching narratives. It is also not about flipping the script by showing that human agential qualities may be attributed to games as matter—an animistic rhetorical move visible in the way current technology-driven discourse portrays AI and its capacity

to “act,” “think,” and “play.” Instead of animating matter, my aim in this chapter was to emphasize a complex web of relations among different agents of ludic entanglements. This perspective sees games not primarily as units or sets of rules but as *open-ended practices* whose meaning can only be established within a local context by placing concrete agential cuts. Games are part of the play phenomenon they coproduce. In this sense, matter (software/game/game world, hardware/controller) is an integral part of the gaming experience, a coagent at play. To see play through the lens of intra-action, then, is to understand it as an entanglement of human and nonhuman forces, turning away from the notion that the human must necessarily call the shots.<sup>53</sup>

A Baradian reading of video games may be revealing in many contexts. In this chapter I have tried to illustrate its relevance by applying it to the data-driven method of gameplay analysis and positioning its relevance within a broader ontological discourse around games. Agential realism brings in a necessary perspective to the study of games and play. It allows us to understand why, despite a huge effort behind what is often called “the science of gameplay,” the actual experiences of thousands of players nevertheless remain personal and often surprising. Despite clear player typologies and study models, the experience of play tends to escape fixed meaning time and again. This paradox is troubling only within the context of Cartesian dualism. The uncertainty and unpredictability at and of play is its inherent characteristic rather than a metaphorical glitch. The moment we shift our understanding of the game from an apparatus or a mechanism to a web of relations or an entanglement of forces, the need to define it, encapsulate it within one meta-ontology, or describe its nature once and for all loses its *raison d’être*. Out of defined sets of rules emerge performative muddles, and what game studies needs is an ontological perspective that would manage not only to describe the order but also to address an open-ended messiness of play.



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# Playing at a Distance

## Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic

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