Prelude: Play at a Distance

> "There is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura in scientific accounts of bodies and machines; there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds."
> Donna Haraway[1]

In 1935, Albert Einstein coined the famous phrase "spooky action at a distance"[2] to dismiss a controversial theory of quantum entanglement, according to which particles separated by great distances could influence one another without the need for direct physical interaction. In other words, despite occupying remote locations, the particles were perceived as intimately linked. At the center of this puzzle lies the materiality behind a medium of communication. For this distant entanglement to be true, the information exchanged between the two particles would need to move faster than light—an occurrence baffling, if not outright impossible, to the Newtonian interpretation of the natural world. How can two objects communicate over such great distances so instantaneously that the information traveling at the speed of light is unable to arrive before the entanglement takes place? Since this book is neither about quantum physics nor about natural philosophy, I will let this question rest as a playful cliffhanger. What I want us to take from this example, though, is the concept of *mediated distance*, which I argue is central to how we experience and make sense of games and play in computerized forms.

Distance is deeply engraved in the media landscape. Without literal distance, there would be no need for medium-aided communication or a theory of communication at all. Think of telephone infrastructures, digital networks, or such mundane devices as remote controls, which have become

almost invisible daily companions of many TV-equipped households in the last several decades. It stands to reason that one of the most frequently used prefixes to describe diverse communication media is *tele*, the Greek root word for "distant." Telegraph, telegram, telephone, or television—all are media of telecommunication.

Distance lies at the very heart of games, too, especially in their computerized and mechanized realization. But contrary to the intuitive association the term may awaken, my aim here is not to study physical distances at play. I will not show how multiplayer online games bring together players from remote parts of the globe. Neither do I want to look into physical distances simulated in game worlds, however fascinating those manifestations of ludic distance may be. What I want to do instead is to present distance as a media aesthetic framework in order to challenge the common understanding of how we interact with technology in general and video games in particular. My goal is to analyze different forms of engagement with video games that require surprisingly little direct or close action from the human players. I want to propose a theoretical position that invites readers to rethink the human agent as a central player in the gaming performance. In this perspective, human players are not self-governing subjects but rather are subject to processes and procedures of technical media.[3] In other words, I question modes of analysis based solely on human players' agency and choices.

This proposition may sound a bit counterintuitive, so let me illustrate it with an example from decades before the emergence of the first video game. Imagine a self-playing piano, its keys moving automatically in a rhythmic dance as if pressed by a ghostly human virtuoso from another space and time. Until the 1920s, when the phonograph completely changed the musical landscape, self-playing pianos (also called player pianos) had been the only instruments able to mechanically store and replay recorded musical pieces.[4] Musical performances were literally punched onto a perforated paper roll, which enabled a faithful recreation of a concrete performance, played out at the listener's own convenience—a truly "spooky" mediated action. Since the era of player pianos, many other media (phonograph, radio, film, etc.) have decoupled space-time dimensions of otherwise synchronous human performances. Digital electronic computers, as the "newest" of all media, have also developed a special relation to the question of action at a distance, this time mediated not by perforated paper rolls but by encoded silicon circuits and digital displays.

Video games have been primarily understood as objects to be actively engaged with, conflicts to be resolved, and meaningful actions to be taken.[5] Games are supposed to be ergodic, requiring a non-trivial effort from their participants.[6] They have been often described as inherently interactive, by theorists, developers and gamers alike.[7] In other words, most digital games, staged in the medium of a computer, could be described as "explicitly participational."[8]

Concepts such as participation, interaction, ergodicity, and human agency, all reflect in different ways the diminishing of mediated distance between the player and the game. Video games are supposed to immerse their players so that they "lose" themselves in the game worlds. The game's interface is usually seen as a barrier between the real and the simulated world, preventing the feeling of full immersion. Kinetic interfaces and VR are luring us with a promise to shorten this physical, cognitive, and semantic distance further, removing the symbolic interface in favor of the embodied one. This *suspension of disbelief*[9] (especially noticeable in VR technology) is founded on an imaginary of the subject merging with their aesthetic object. In video games, it is a combination of storytelling, illusion (whether optical, algorithmic, or embodied), and agency that reduces the distance between the real and the imagined.

But contrary to the popular imaginary of gaming, it is not solely defined by immersion via direct and close action. Play emerges out of a delicate balance between action and inaction. With each agential act comes a moment of pause, if not a stop. Vertigo is as much about losing balance as keeping it. Chance is a simultaneous acceptance of randomness and a firm belief in luck. Competition is the drive to win and the risk of losing. Mimicry is an act of imitation, close to its referent and yet distant enough to remain its parody. More importantly, to play is not only to engage but also to let go; to accept the agentiality of matter and to see oneself not as a player *in* the game world but a player *of* the game world, to paraphrase the feminist theorist Karen Barad.[10]

Play relies on those tensions and seemingly contradictory moments of passivity and activity, distraction and attraction, distance and closeness. This dynamic is very well reflected in the German adjective *spannend*, which is used to describe the fun property of games. The related noun *Spannung* points toward the concept of tension, suspense, or—to be even more precise in terms of media theory—the difference between the "plus" and

the "minus" in voltage. *Spannung* is that which spans the gap between two states; in the case of video games, the active state and the inactive state.

To think in terms of distance, then, is to acknowledge those two states and that which spans them. Play, although defined primarily through the concept of focused activity, needs moments of inactivity. By bringing distance into the conversation, I want to shed some critical light on the inactive side of this ludic joint venture, which has not been given much attention in the study of play and video games. I see action and inaction as complementary and necessary critical dimensions—the yin and the yang of play.

The action-based, interactive, and participatory understanding of digital play and video games should not be regarded as an objective statement of the configurable and procedural capacity of the computational medium. Play and games are always "placed in context within broader value systems."[11] Therefore, understanding play and games is always filtered through underlying ideological values at play. The mainstream rhetoric of video games is an example of a modern Western rhetoric of play as progress, power, and the self. The forms of play that this book scrutinizes are often called "not-games." Consequently, the modes of play that are central to this project have little to do with individual optimization and empowerment through mastery and choice. My goal is to understand video games and play, looking beyond the modern rhetoric of the empowered progressing self.

Mediated Distance across Disciplines

As a concept rooted in media theory, digital humanities, and play theory, distance carries with it diverse interpretational perspectives; some problematizing the spatial and physical aspects of interaction, others employing distance as a semiotic gesture.

Distance takes a central spot in a recent media historical intervention by Florian Sprenger, Christina Vagt, and John Durham Peters titled *Action at a Distance* (2020).[12] In three intertwined essays, the authors problematize media as necessary material connectors in the context of spatial separation. They explore the materiality of communication and mediality of transmission, provoking new questions about human interaction within material and immaterial entangled infrastructures. They do this by reviving one of the most prominent conundrums in the history of physics (to which

I alluded in the introductory paragraph of this prelude): the impossibility of interaction at a distance without physical touch or any other measurably mediating force.

Media are often seen as intervening forces able to shorten the distance, but they may also coproduce methods of analysis, which introduce distance into the cognitive process of analysis. Literary theory, for instance, contemplates the interplay between closeness and distance by juxtaposing the traditional interpretational method of close reading with so-called distant reading. The latter describes a computer-aided approach to reading proposed by Franco Moretti.[13] Unlike close reading, which requires in-depth study of texts, distant reading is about analyzing large amounts of metadata about literary texts. In other words, the method of distant reading distances the reader from the text and advocates for the analysis of metatextual data about a large sample of texts closely read by the machine instead.

Distance, then, lays bare a certain medial paradox. On the one hand, digital electronic media shorten the physical communication distance among its users; on the other, analytical methods based on big data may add distance between the theorist and the object of analysis. It gets even more complicated. In the formative years of game studies, many scholars wrote about the importance of "close playing" as a means of ludic analysis. Here lies yet another paradox: to "close play" a game, we need to introduce a *critical distance* toward the very object of play. The usually immersive act of play thus becomes a self-reflective act of distant play, in which the disbelief in the fictional game world is not suspended.[14]

Within the context of play, the importance of mediated distance was stressed by Brian Sutton-Smith, one of the most prominent play theorists of the twentieth century. At the first annual conference of the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) in 2003, Sutton-Smith's keynote speech encouraged the game studies community to look into symbolic dimensions of distance in video games. He argued that many video games are *distanced forms* of contest, as opposed to a sport like football, which requires bodily contact and therefore raises the chance of venting unmediated anger. In his view, a computer acts as a layer that symbolically distances the player from the direct bodily moment of play—"You are looking at a screen or you are manipulating the computer, which puts you at great distance."[15] Sutton-Smith understood the unique role of the computer as a machine for facilitating play and emphasized the highly mediated character of computer

play. In it, he saw hope for providing child players with "defenses" against unmediated and direct forms of anger.

The French philosopher Jacques Henriot, in his treatises *Le jeu* (1969) and *Sous couleur de jouer: la métaphore ludique* (1989), reflected play through the key symbolic figure of distance. He founded his theory of play on a semantic core derived from a mechanical understanding of play. The latter points towards *distance* as a necessary condition for play to occur. Play denotes a space or a gap, which literally leaves room for play in mechanical machinery (e.g., gears, hinges, joints). Distance, then, is a symbolic interval that makes it possible for a game to take place at all. In other words, any game requires distance to be created and maintained between the player and the said game. Playing is a dialectical operation that relies on the player's internal interpretation of play. It belongs to the order of the signifier; play is only a matter of meaning. In other words, the sense of the game is produced by the player thanks to their playful attitude, but this sense is enabled only by the player's distance towards the game, as interpreted by Maude Bonenfant, a Canadian semiotician and play scholar.[16]

For me, distance at play is, above all, a medium- and matter-centric perspective that sheds light on a diversity of delegated, automated, and otherwise distant experiences of play, all of which tend to be pushed to the edges of gameness. To understand the diversity and ambiguity of digital play and the role of the human player within, we need to rethink time and again what it means to play.

Media Aesthetic of Play

My understanding of video game aesthetic stems from a medium-centered approach to play. One of my primary inspirations is the work of Walter Benjamin, who wrote on the then-new media of photography and film in the early decades of the twentieth century. Many of his works shed light on how technical media and their means of production change the aesthetic experience thereof. In his famous essay "The Work of Art in Times of Technical Reproducibility," Benjamin investigates the effects of technical reproducibility of images on their audience and on the perception of visual art in general.[17] I would like to draw a similar parallel between computational processes and the way they shape the aesthetic experiences of digital games. In that sense, the aesthetic of play I aim to engage with could be regarded

as a media aesthetic, since it is embedded within specific medial processes. I want to explore these processes and show how they, in turn, shape what we perceive as gameplay or playful practices.

Let me illustrate the above point with an example. It is not exactly the same aesthetic experience to play ping-pong and *Pong* (1972). Even the most realistic, modern sport video games (e.g., the FIFA and NBA 2K series) provide an experience much different to that of football or basketball on a physical court; although the fundamental rules of the game remain unchanged. In other words, computers mediate play. And the process of ludic mediation is shaped by the processes and infrastructure of the computing machine. The medium changes the ludic message. As Jussi Parikka once wrote, "the way we see, think and memorise, dream and hallucinate, are conditioned mediatically."[18] This applies to play as well.

What I want to argue in this book is the following: to theorize the experience of (game)play within the digital, we need a medium specific or medium-centric aesthetic perspective—one that is able to think with and within the digital medium. We need a digital aesthetic that would be able to address the "discrepancy between continuity of sensation and the discreteness of digital technology."[19] The aesthetic of digital games leaning on analog concepts misses the point, or, at best, provides for a preliminary point of departure. Analyzing digital gaming through analog media such as literature, theater, film, or photography surely yields crucial insights. Nevertheless, these fail to address the specificity of the computational medium. This book is an attempt to theorize the experience of playing video games by putting the digital medium at the forefront, sometimes at the expense of the human player. Ultimately, it asks what it means to experience a digital game aesthetically through the computational medium and how to understand play if we are not involved as close agents and direct controllers of technology—or, to put it in other words still, how the computer influences aesthetic practices of play.

It should come as no surprise that to understand how we play in the twenty-first century, we need to take into account the computer medium. Early on in the history of game studies, the German media theorist Claus Pias presented an insightful media theoretical analysis in *Computer Game Worlds* (2017).[20] Alexander Galloway's *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* is another example of how to "do" media aesthetic of video games.[21] Ian Bogost's *Unit Operations* and the concept of procedural rhetoric exposes

the inner workings of the computational medium in how we make sense of video games.[22] Miguel Sicart devotes the final chapter of his book, *Play Matters*, to play in the computerized medium.[23] *Playing at a Distance* wants to build on this tradition by rethinking how the computer medium molds the aesthetic experience of play.

Indirectly, if not by title association, this book addresses Brian Upton's work on the aesthetic of play.[24] As much as I agree that play is something that reaches beyond video games, and that many novelties of the digital gaming medium can be found in earlier playful forms, I do not share Upton's media-unspecific conviction that the gameplay experience of a first-person shooter is comparable to reading lines of Homer. Digital media are fundamentally different from their analog precedents, and the difference does not necessarily lie in their interactivity, nonlinearity, or multimodality—features that "sell" the new medium rather than critically look into its core. It is the discreteness as opposed to continuity that differentiates digital and analog media. It is their divisible and modular structures that have fundamentally changed the experience of play. And although the urge to play is predigital and reaches far beyond video games—or, for that matter, any games (defined as structured systems with rules)—a given medium molds the experience of play in the rhythm and shape of that particular medium. This, in turn, influences the aesthetic reception of play. After Claus Pias's media-historical investigation of play, Upton's comparison of the first-person shooter to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* seems a medium-agnostic rhetorical trick at best.[25] The human stories of war, loss, and love we tell might share some ahistorical similarities, but the question is how those stories are experienced situationally and locally in a given medium. Oral storytelling, stage performance, and narratives written on a scroll or in a codex (a book form consisting of separate sheets of paper bound together) create diverse, if not fundamentally different, aesthetic experiences.

But the story of the media aesthetic of distant play does not end with the medium. To end with the medium is to simply flip the coin; to take agency away from the human and to attribute it to "dead" matter instead; to claim that things, too, have agency.[26] Instead of offering a symmetrical story of agency in video games, I want to show how matter comes to matter, how it is configured, and how it reconfigures.[27] In such a light, the player is part of the gaming situation; they are not *in* but *of* the game world, configured and co-constituted by it. Play, then, is neither a human nor a nonhuman act.

Play emerges out of complex material, human and nonhuman ludic entanglements. It is a relation that forms the relata, not the other way around. To put forward such an understanding of play, I reach out to agential realism, a philosophy of posthuman performativity proposed by Karen Barad. In doing so, I also want to position my take on the media aesthetic of play in the new materialist and posthuman tradition while remaining in dialogue with other game scholars and colleagues such as Alenda Chang, Brendan Keogh, Darshana Jayemanne, Justin Keever, and Justyna Janik, among others, who have employed posthuman perspectives in their own explorations of play.

Dis-Playing Video Games

Out of the considerations on distance, media aesthetic, and posthuman performativity emerges my reinterpretation of computer mediated play as *play at a distance* or *dis-play*. And so, to dis-play is to be at a distance from an active and direct moment of play (from the Latin *dis-*, away, apart), to delegate the immediate action towards the machine, participating in the (algorithmic) spectacle (display) instead. To dis-play is also to unfold, to become, and to emerge by gradually opening up in its entirety (from the Latin *displicare*, unfold). And finally, to dis-play is to participate as one of the other possible agents in a distributed algorithmic entanglement. Playing at a distance is a medium-centric, posthumanist, and performative perspective, challenging the notion of the player and the played. Its aim is to decenter the human player and display other agents at play. The manifestation of play on the screen, in the case of digital games—that which is displayed—is a representational image of multiple agencies: the instantiation of rules, the execution of code, the cognitive and physical actions of the player, and the material possibility of play (raw materials used in manufacturing hardware components, the labor involved in assembling console hardware, shipping vessels carrying gaming consoles overseas for sale, access to electricity, etc.).

I see dis-play as a theoretical perspective grounded in its time, one that helps to understand the current computer gaming moment. It encourages thinking outside of the primacy of the thumb, questioning agency and direct control—qualities that have been almost synonymous with video games and technology. But it is not only games that exemplify the act of dis-playing; other digital practices unfold at a distance, too. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram require only relatively

short moments or bursts of activity. Collectively we produce a "living" space that acts 24/7, changing every time we leave it and further feeding off of our intermittent moments of action whenever we come back to it. Live-streaming services such as Twitch are more persistent than ever, allowing us to pop in and out at our leisure and in our own available space with no commitment or effort required; rather than being put on the spot or having to play the game themselves, viewers simply watch others play it instead. Watching, spectating, or lurking have become recognizable play forms in their own rights. This form of spectatorship surpasses the merely aesthetic level of the interface or the perceived image. What we are dealing with here is an algorithmic spectacle where images become "functions in the mathematical realm."[28] Perhaps the most illustrative example of such a spectacle, stripped to its bare ludic bones, is *Number* (2013) by Tyler Glaiel, a self-playing idle game depicting numbers going up. Consider also the more recent *Universal Paperclips* (2017) by Frank Lantz, about an AI that makes paperclips: "It's free to play, it lives in your browser, and all you have to look at is numbers."[29]

It is no coincidence that distance playing comes to mind at a time when automation, algorithmic agency, bots of all kind, and deep learning occupy news headlines worldwide. It is also not entirely coincidental that self-playing and idle games have appeared in the wider consciousness in recent years, or that a self-playing video game has been displayed in one of the world's major art galleries.[30] Such automated experiments may be the new ludic frontier or a whimsical temporary experiment in the larger history of digital games and media. Whichever turns out to be true, this book is about to capture them in the moment and offer a compass to navigate through those barely explored distant worlds.

The problem of defining or claiming the true aesthetic experience of video gaming has appeared under many names—casual gaming, walking simulations, or cozy gaming—all standing in opposition to the "real" gaming experience, which is supposed to be hard-core, difficult, attentive, and connected with the investment of considerable amounts of time. In their latest book *Real Games* Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul examine this question by asking what happens when a game's gameness is called into question.[31] They explore dominant culture discourses about legitimate games from a rhetorical perspective, reaching out to popular press, essays, and blog posts. My book, by contrast, approaches the question of gameness

by trying to develop a new language for the media aesthetic experience of digital play, which may in the end contribute to a wider understanding of what digital games and gaming are in all their diversity of experiences and forms.

Finally, I would like to look at games not only as the epitome of participatory culture or the most iconic digital examples of the "interactive turn" but also as the experiments and outcomes of the "material turn" and the "automatic turn." [32] The latter has led not only to the automation of drudgery but also, subversively, pleasure. Automated digital play has also followed in the footsteps of high-end programming languages, which tend to delegate and automate many parts of the code; distance, then, is hard-coded into the infrastructure of the digital machine. Distant play allows me to revisit crucial concepts, such as interactivity, control, hands-on participation, and human agency, among many others. In doing so, I hope to capture emerging digital practices and carve out new ways to describe them.

Chapter Overview

My interpretation of distance in and at play reaches out to a variety of interdisciplinary theories, building on such concepts as interpassivity, ambience, automation, and intra-activity, among others. Each chapter presents a different aspect of playing at a distance, putting a specific game, play format, genre, or ludic phenomenon under the magnifying glass. In the words of the historian Sigfried Giedion, "The sun is mirrored even in a coffee spoon."[33] It is, after all, the modest objects of everyday life, "usually not granted earnest consideration," that have a great power to shape our modes of living, and illustrate the changing world around us.[34] Many of the games I mention in this book are modest objects (and sometimes subjects) of play—minor games, niche genres, or experimental modes within bigger games or play practices—that complicate rather than explicate gaming.[35]

Chapter 1, "Beyond Interactivity," brings together thinkers and theories that challenge interactivity as the pivotal concept necessary to understand digital media and video games. Alongside many other scholars, I show that interactivity as a leading conceptual axis of video games fails to account for a diversity of play forms. The chapter lays analytical ground for the rest of the book and is filled with examples of computer-mediated play that are otherwise difficult to classify or, in the worst case, dismissed as "notgames."

Chapter 2, "Interpassive Play," opens up a discussion on the emerging practice of playful involvement with self-playing systems, and the sort of play that is characterized by distance and delegation rather than close and focused engagement. It explores the peculiar phenomenon of delegated pleasure and extends it to that of delegated play. The chapter also unpacks the theory of interpassivity, developed by the contemporary Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller, to demonstrate how it applies to video games, with a specific focus on the genre of "idle" games.[36]

In Chapter 3, "Ambient Play," I explore the concepts of ambience and background aesthetic. To understand the enveloping capacity of video games, I propose a twofold interpretation of ambience as either *operational* or *affective*. The first perspective points toward background processes of the computer as well as games and gameplay forms seamlessly embedded within the daily rhythms of their players, and the latter discusses ambience in relation to a slow and flaneur-like experience of play.

Chapter 4, "Automated Play," sits at the crossroads between human agency and computer automation. It is an attempt to sketch a media archaeology and history of automated play, bringing player pianos, playful automata from the Enlightenment era, and current artificial intelligence (AI)–driven agents into the game. The chapter begins with a short history of the automatization of mind, juxtaposing the twenty-first-century computer program AlphaGo against the eighteenth-century chess-playing automaton. It then looks into the mechanization of physical skill, drawing parallels between contemporary mods used to automate tedious gameplay and late nineteenth-century instruments such as pianolas, which turned a highly skilled human act of musical play into a relatively uncomplicated semiautomatic activity. Ultimately, the chapter aims to offer possible directions for critical inquiry into automation in and around play.

Chapter 5, "Intra-active Play," repositions the categories of players and games as subjects and objects, arguing that a different story of play needs to be put in place. Games change us as much as we change them (most of the time, literally). Out of this observation emerges a pledge for a posthuman and performative media aesthetic of play, drawing heavily from the philosophy of Karen Barad.

Chapter 6, "Spectated Play," is a contemplation of the visual and computational aspects of digital play, offering a reconciliation between the analog and the digital. The image, or that which is displayed, plays a central role in

video games. The recent turn toward spectacle in gaming culture (exemplified by Twitch streamers and professional e-sports) has brought the element of displaying play to a new dimension.

The book culminates in a conclusion called "Postlude: Distance at Play," in which I try to bring together all the diverse perspectives on play under the banner of *distance*, doing away with binarism and reviving the ambiguity of and at play. Play at a distance privileges neither the visual nor the procedural, neither the active nor the passive, neither the performed nor the spectated, neither the player nor the played. It strives to offer a situated, performative, and, most crucially, a mediated reading of play—one in which agency is not a property possessed by a human player but a force distributed within and across the ludic entanglement.

Playing at a Distance

Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic

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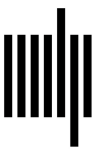

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