

# **(Re)framing computer games with(in) agential realism**

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## **Introduction**

With this paper we will try to further understandings of games as emergent within the real and everyday life. This line of thought is not new and can historically briefly be summarized as understandings of playing (games) as modes of experience rather than distinct separate activities outside of everyday life. A thorough account of how play is and have been an intrinsic part of human cultural evolution was published in 1938 by Johan Huizinga. Huizinga argued to not short-circuit play from other everyday activities. By introducing *consecrated spots* exemplified by, among several other things, the famous *magic circle* he tried to put emphasis on how play is not something separate from the real or ordinary life but rather a temporary and highly ordered space differentiating and layering itself within everyday life (Huizinga, 1938).

Interestingly though, we still today find a lot of interpretations of Huizinga, claiming that he argued for the opposite. That he suggested to set aside play as an activity distinct from the real and everyday (ordinary) life. This setting aside is likewise common with respect to games. Thomas Malaby have made an eloquent argument in a paper (2007) addressing this issue. Malaby argues that games have been bound as artifacts within a subset of play, separating them from other activities within everyday life. Games have therefore been trapped in understandings as activities that are considered to be safe (consequence free), pleasurable (“fun” or normatively positive), and unserious<sup>1</sup> (non productive). Malaby suggests that games are better understood as socially constructed artifacts and that games are processual. He further argues that games can be opened for rethinking by rejecting play as a supercategory of activity for games.

On the one hand we accept Malaby’s argument to reject play as a supercategory. On the other hand we want to take further Malaby’s argumentation and not settle with his suggestion that

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<sup>1</sup> Malaby does not himself use the word “serious”. By referring to Stevens (1980) he exemplifies how play and by extension games are understood as separate from “work”-activities. We invite “serious” into the mix as a reference to another field of study that have been trying to bridge the gap between games and other activities such as work and education. However we think that by categorizing games as serious or not risk to further manifest games as something separate and play-bound.

games are socially constructed artifacts implying that “games are grounded in (and constituted by) human practice and are therefore in the process of becoming” (Malaby, 2007, p. 103). This echoes an anthropocentric viewpoint with a pre-made cartesian cause-effect-idiom. Agency is with this view bound to an active human agent in a predetermined subject-object relation. We agree that games are in processes of becoming, however we will argue that they (like other phenomena within everyday life) are not bound within a supercategory of human agency in their becomings.

For this reason we propose a (re)framing of (computer) games within the onto-epistemological framework *agential realism* proposed by Karen Barad (Barad, 1998, 2003, 2007). As Malaby, we aim to open up space for the study of games as emergent within the real and as part of everyday life. However we want to avoid the creation of dichotomies and predefined boundaries in agency, causality and subject-object relations.

What Barad propose is an ontology called *agential reality* and the ‘philosophy’ *agential realism* as both a new understanding of reality and an onto-epistemological framework. *Agential reality* aims for “an understanding of reality that takes account of both the exclusions upon which it depends and its openness to future reworkings“ (Barad, 1998, p.104). *Agential realism* aims for “the goal of providing accurate descriptions of agential reality—that reality within which we intra-act and have our being—rather than some imagined and idealized human-independent reality” (Barad, 1998, p. 105). Agential realism is similar to, but not the same as, the differential ontology proposed by Deleuze in *Difference and repetition* (2004) which we also draw from in this text.

There are a few things that we want to highlight before we continue. One is that, although this text is an attempt to reframe games within agential realism, it should be read as an ongoing inquiry not as a final answer. As such we do not seek to undermine or falsify other accounts of games or to claim true interpretations of referenced text. Therefore we will follow Barad’s call to re-turn (to) the past, but “not by returning as in reflecting on or going back to a past that was, but re-turning as in turning it over and over again [...], diffracting anew, in the making of new temporalities (spacetime-matterings), new diffraction patterns” (Barad, 2014).

By re-turning (to) Huizinga’s notion of play we will try to make a difference by adding to the plethora of understandings of games. With this re-turn we not only want to reject play as a supercategory of actions for games. We also want to reject humans as a superobject of agency in processes of becoming, and “ordinary life” as a superobject to other phenomena in the real (e.g. games). Games can then be figured as (re)verberations within the real.

The computer games we have used in conjunction with the texts to explore this space are FromSoftware’s “Soul series” (FromSoftware, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2016). The games in the Soul series are often categorized as action role-playing games. They take place in what appears as a medieval setting on the verge of an apocalypse but with magical and other

occult additions. Although the player gets to explore and defy different places and stories in each game there are several recurring storylines and characters amongst the games in the series. One could argue that the games and the series itself is figured as an Nietzschean eternal return where “god is dead”<sup>2</sup>, and it’s unclear both to you (as the one playing) and to the characters you encounter on what is the meaning and what to believe in. Several characters in game are in fact figured as though they have given up or gone mad due to this recurrence or seemingly purposeless world. As is the case with many players, they too give up due to the series being famous as one of the most challenging games series produced.

To situate ourselves in an extended transdisciplinary manner, besides our academic home in media technologies and technoscience studies, we have employed a Bartle test derived from Bartles paper Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs (Bartle, 1996). This is not a statement to the scientific value of the test, but readers and gamers may find it relevant for our references to games how we scored according to the test<sup>3</sup>:

- Anders - 73% explorer, 60% killer, 53% achiever, and 13% Socialiser
- Linus - 100% Explorer, 47% Achiever, 40% Socialiser, 13% Killer

Another important thing to note is that we use the concept of difference from Gilles Deleuze (2004). This means that difference is not used to denote opposition or separateness but as difference within. To Deleuze, differences made are what makes part of the world (e.g. ordinary life and games) intelligible, not as separate parts but as a temporally manifested difference within. Difference is thus not something compared between two (or more) distinct pre-existing entities, it is a matter of affirmation, not negation. Deleuze suggest that difference is what makes it possible to distinguish something, which require for that which it is distinguished from to be in relation. Thus Deleuze argues, we must say that “difference is made, or makes itself, as in the expression ‘make the difference’.” (Deleuze, 2004, p. 37).

Deleuze’s difference is similar to the quantum phenomena diffraction. Karen Barad uses diffraction to highlight how differences are made as opposed to displacements with reflection. Even though it is in part an optical metaphor used as an explanatory model, we want to make it clear that it is an onto-epistemological question being examined. (Barad, 2007). Reflection is a practice of displacement. The same is copied or displaced elsewhere. Reflexivity can thus be seen as a search for the “really real”. In this sense is close to the judeo-christian monotheistic heritage. Something is made in something’s image. Truth or being are tied to specific separate objects. Difference from this perspective is diluted, impure and less. Diffraction instead is a practice of interference. Diffraction does not copy or displace, “a diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where

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<sup>2</sup> In reference to *The madman*, aphorism 125, Book 3 in *The Gay Science* by Friedrich Nietzsche, and to the travels and speeches by Zarathustra in his seminal book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*.

<sup>3</sup> The test was accessed 2017-11-06 at <http://matthewbarr.co.uk/bartle/index.ph>

the effects of differences appear” (Haraway, 1992, p. 300). Diffraction is thus a difference making within.

### **Games made different**

One way bring computer games into an affirmative view of difference is to regard them as mediums. By medium we here re-turn what Marshall McLuhan put in motion with his seminal book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964). McLuhan has had a huge impact on how media in general have been studied. McLuhan argued that a medium should not primarily be studied for the content that it supposedly delivers but for the way a medium extends human senses and what effects that has in society. Media technologies are then not studied solely as neutral channels for information transfer. The famous quote “the medium is the message” call on the need to regard the larger contexts in which media technologies emerge.

To McLuhan, games like other mediums are extensions of an individual or a group. Their effects are a “reconfiguring of the parts of the group or individual that are *not* so extended” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 263, author’s own emphasis). Games he continues, “has the power to impose its own assumptions by setting the human community into new relationships and postures” (ibid, p. 263). Games as mediums makes a difference to established norms and beings. Either as extensions (and thus also reductions) to capabilities of sensing and modes of experience, or as reconfigurations to relations and structures in communities.

McLuhan states that the content of one medium is always another medium (1964, p. 8). As an example he suggests that thought is the content of speech. Although we don’t think it will be fruitful to try to make a complete general categorisation of which medium is which content, there are some points to be made. The idea of an imaginary spiral with intertwined mediums is interesting because in the one end of the spiral we are bound to end up in ontological questions.

McLuhan presents several other cases on how media undoubtedly have brought about transformations in how we perceive and enable different possibilities to act in society. Although there are several troublesome differentiations in McLuhan’s analysis with respect to issues such as gender and ethnicity, we want to re-turn games as what McLuhan calls “make happen”-agents (McLuhan, 1964, p. 53). Focus is then on what games puts in motion and the complexity of the effects produced in society. This shift the primary epistemological question with respect to games from what a game is or what a game is about, to what a game does (puts in motion). An interesting but also sensitive question one could ask is whether a game should be considered violent with respect to its content and/or with respect to what it puts in motion?

Even though computer games and other digital media can be likened in some aspects, computer games are made different with respect to expectations and trust compared to other digital media. The digital agenda of the EU (2010) with its seven “pillars” is a clear-cut example of expectation on digital media.

“[The] use of digital technologies [...] will provide Europeans with a better quality of life through, for example, better health care, safer and more efficient transport solutions, cleaner environment, new media opportunities and easier access to public services and cultural content” (European Commission, 2010)

Whereas other media technologies are expected to make (human) life better and easier, digital games are often not. Games are supposed to be challenging and competitive. At the same time, computer games have a huge impact in our everyday lives. In a recent study 97 % of people between the ages of 18-25 play digital games (Bean, 2016). Computer games are also known for their ability to capture the attention of players, sometimes in such powerful ways that they have been studied as addictive in similar ways to drugs. As such powerful phenomena games have also been studied as a way to ‘escape’ reality (e.g. McGonigal, 2011). To McGonigal this boils down to the same intriguing question as Bernard Suits coined as the *lusory attitude* (2014) — or as McGonigal puts it, “Why on earth are so many people volunteering to tackle such completely unnecessary obstacles?” (2011, p. 27). Again, as Malaby already have argued (2007), this is made possible when games are bound under the supercategory activity of play. Games are thus limited to be recreational or entertaining, separating them from being real, serious or productive.

But how do these assumptions or expectations end up in games? Are they built into the game rules? Are they personal traits for some people but not others? Are they consciously designed into the mechanics, content, narrative or other parts of a game? We will argue that this escape is not a separation. It is difference made within that, which among other things, reconfigures for other media normatively non-positive attributes into positive additions to expectations and experiences of digital media.

### **Games as material-discursive practices**

From agential realism, computer games emerge not simply as (fun) entertainment or addiction, but as (re)verberations within society, culture and our understandings of the world in which we have our being.

To frame computer games we need to introduce concepts from agential realism and how they differ from other (traditional) realisms. We will focus on the concepts material-discursive practices, intra-action, agential cuts, and diffraction. Since these concepts are themselves co-constitutive we will try to explain them through each other and at the same time make connections to computer games. It is important to note that this article's aim is not to be an in

depth explanation of agential realism, for that we refer to Barad's book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007). As Barad points out, because agential realism is drawn out from a world of "quantum weirdness", the concepts in themselves are highly counterintuitive at first sight (Barad 2007, pp. 81 & 83).

Agential realism makes a shift from uncertainty to indeterminacy. The future is not an uncertain place in time ready for our increasingly fine detailed predictions. If understood within agential reality, the future is indeterminate not uncertain. The future gets made through our more or less consciously active part in determining specific situated understandings of the real. What we perceive as a game is a determining of specific parts of reality. The game which we are part in shaping is "not an arbitrary construction of our choosing, [... it is] sedimented out of particular practices" (Barad, 1998, p. 102). This also means that the game is made "intelligible through certain practices and not others" (Barad, 1998, p. 105).

The main difference that agential realism introduces is that it recognises phenomena as the smallest ontological unit. This means that things in relation such as subjects and objects are not filled with meaning or inherent properties beforehand. The relata (that which is related) do not pre-exist / post-exist its relations. Subjects and objects become meaningful within phenomena and from intra-actions.

*Material-discursive practices are specific iterative enactments—agential intra-actions—through which matter is differentially engaged and articulated (in the emergence of boundaries and meanings), reconfiguring the material-discursive field of possibilities in the iterative dynamics of intra-activity that is agency. Intra-actions are causally constraining nondeterministic enactments through which matter-in-the-process-of-becoming is sedimented out and enfolded in further materializations.*  
(Barad, 2003, author's own emphasis)

Note specifically how Barad switch terminology from interaction to intra-action. Intra-action is a neology describing agentially separable components intra-acting within phenomena. This is in contrast to interaction that describes separate independent entities interacting.

Intra-actions are thus what enact and make meaningful what emerge as a game, a gamer and how other subject-object relationships are (re)configured in practices of games. Put in other terms, a gamer or a game is not made meaningful without the practice of gameplay.

Becoming game(r) is a reverberation of intra-actions within the phenomena of a game.

Barad emphasizes the fact that agential realism is not an attempt to render obsolete notions of causality and objectivity, but to shift them inside particular phenomena. Instead of cartesian cuts, which delineates an exteriority to secure objectivity, an agential cut "delineates the "measuring agency" from the "measured object" [as] "parts" of a particular entangled state" (Barad, 2007, p. 351, the author's own internal quotation marks). The same applies to

causality where the effect (observing agency) is agentially made separate from the cause (observed object).

Barad thus adds to understandings of difference in that it is “formed through intra-activity, in the making of ‘this’ and ‘that’ within the phenomenon that is constituted in their inseparability” (2014). What this implies is that subjectivity and objectivity are not opposed to one another, objectivity is not not-subjectivity. Barad says that this is what Niels Bohr tried to tell us, and the key to understand that this is a radical reworking of the cause-effect-idiom is that “identity is not essence, fixity or givenness, but a contingent iterative performativity” (Barad, 2014).

As an example. When playing a console based computer game, sitting in front of a living room TV, both the player as a human, the controller, the TV, the armchair, etc. become enacted as part of a playing subject. We may even include parts within the digital game world like the avatar to the playing subject. However, if the batteries run low in the controller the situation will be reconfigured and the controller will become an object of observation to the playing subject. Likewise, the avatar will become an object of observation if for some reason it behaves in a way not expected by the playing subject or does/says something not acceptable to the playing subject (e.g. in a cutscene or similar). These kind of reconfigurations are examples of material-discursive practices in which intra-actions make cuts that differentiates between different subject-object relations. The cuts made are agential cuts which differ from cartesian cuts.

Since phenomena are not either independent “objects” but are agentially made separate by intra-actions, becoming game(r) or the practices of games are not done in isolation from other phenomena in reality (other everyday ongoings). This is what unfold when returning to Huizinga notion of play. In our interpretation, the much (mis)quoted *magic circle* is neither a way to make play, or by extension games, as something set apart, nor a way to subset games under the superobject of the ordinary. It is rather one example among others to highlight how meaning is made different depending on the intra-actions enacting different agential cuts within everyday life. Reality is the same but will reverberate differently. Ordinary life is not a superobject to anything, it is itself a temporally manifested phenomena in constant reconfiguration. Reality will be made intelligible under specific practices as ordinary life and at others as a game. Within agential realism, play and by extension games confer meaning to actions. But it is not only meaning that is enacted. The agential cuts also enact agency constraining meaning-making and limiting meaningful actions as well as subject-object relations.

### **Material-discursive practices in the Soul series**

The games in the Soul series are interesting examples of Deleuze’s affirmative difference and Barad’s material-discursive practices. The games are difficult to categorize into specific game

genres or to ascribe certain typical game characteristics. If we ask ourselves if Dark Souls 2 is a multiplayer game we wouldn't be able to say yes or no. The answer must be “yes and no”, or “it depends”. The game is not a typical multiplayer game where several players share a common game world or parts of a common game world. It is at first sight a typical single player game in which you have your own game world and playing the game affects your game world<sup>4</sup> and not others.

But after playing the game a while you realize that other players get to have agency in your game world. The first obvious discovery of this are messages left in the game world by either by the developers or other players. These come in two variants one constructed of predefined words strung together warning you of upcoming dangers or pointing out interesting opportunities. However most players soon discover that like most things in the Souls games these messages are not categorically trustworthy in that they can and are used by other players to lure the player to an untimely demise often involving a cliff. Which leads to the other kind of message that is a blood stain that when activated with shows a player's final moments before dying. The second discovery is when you notice that you can summon other players to your game world for help, and that other players by their own will can invade your game world to kill you.

For new player to the game series there are also situations where it seems like you have been invaded by another player but it is actually a computer controlled character or non-player character (npc<sup>5</sup>) invading your game world. This becomes clear first after repeating the same parts of the game to find the same character invading at the same place and time using the same movement pattern. Though, the temporal interference in the current ongoing gameplay is just like being invaded by another player.

It gets even more complex since certain requirements need to be fulfilled to enable summoning or invasion of other players. The following list exemplifies requirements for Dark Souls 2:

- If you havn't been killed since starting the game you can summon players and other players can invade your game world.
- That you are in a game zone that permits summoning / invasions (most of the game)
- If you use a specific in-game item (Human effigy) after you have been killed you can summon players and other players can invade your game world.
- If you manage to complete specific challenges in your game world you can get items that allow you to invade other players game worlds in different ways

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<sup>4</sup> We make a cut delineating what we call one's own and other's game world, although we realize that this cut is also open for reconfiguration and can be questioned in terms of different player experiences and different play situations.

<sup>5</sup> From here on we will refer to these kind of characters as npc's (Non Player Characters) as they are controlled by the computer.

- A working Internet connection

To add on this, after completing specific parts in the game players can choose to join different covenants. Some covenants are focused on invading other players to kill or hinder the invaded player. Other covenants are focused on helping players complete challenges in the game by allowing themselves to be summoned. Experienced players can in fact choose to spend most of their time invading or being summoned to other players game worlds instead of spending time in their own game world.

Thus, if this is a multiplayer game or not is indeterminate, being determined only temporally in specific situations. It's not either meaningful to say that the game as an object has built in multiplayer properties, since it would be possible to play the game without an multiplayer experience (even without an Internet connection for that matter). The agential cuts enacting subject-object relations and agency will make the differences — it's material-discursive practices. Material as the game pose different requirements, limitations and possibilities for multiplayer action, and discursive as experiences of playing a multiplayer game depends on player choice in how the game is played, or on how a player perceives a gameplay situation.

From a design perspective we can learn something interesting from this. If the concept of multiplayer is freed from a supercategory of human agency, what is designed as *multiplayer* may have a larger space to act within. As we have already seen with the previous example from Dark Souls 2, what is designed to act as another player can be a npc. We want to point to two more intricate examples where the concept of multiplayer is made different in an affirmative way, or put otherwise where the design space for multiplayer experiences is extended.

The first example is from Dark Souls 3. In one part of the game one can choose to be summoned to help another player. However, when you are summoned to the player's game world it turns out you have been summoned to help a npc player fend off yet another npc player invading that game world. When played this seems and works as a multiplayer experience, but no other (human) player is involved. This example shows how the designed infrastructure (mechanics) to enable multiplayer experiences is not binding agency exclusively to humans. The same kind of twist on world agency is found in the Knight Lautrec questline present in Dark Souls.

The other example, present in both Dark Souls 3 and Demon's souls<sup>6</sup>, is when a player have to fight one of the boss encounters. Both encounters is presented like other boss encounters starting of with a cutscene introducing the boss. Altho these encounters have the theme of summoning. However, as players progresses past the encounter they can obtain in-game artifacts enabling them to be summoned and become the boss in the above mentioned

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<sup>6</sup> In Demon's souls this is the Old Monk encounter and in Dark Souls 3 Halflight, Spear of the Church.

encounter in another player's game world. That is, many players encountering this boss may not even be aware of the fact that they are involved in a multiplayer experience. This was the probably the case to a greater extent in Demon's souls where the mechanic was novel and "let's play videos" were not yet a thing. The agency for multiplayer experiences in this case, although two acting parts are required, does not have to involve an aware human subject in the one part.

## **Conclusions**

"Is this a game to you?", one might ask in an attempt to render your actions or thoughts as something unserious or non productive. This premeditated perception of games is made possible by binding games under the supercategory of play, setting it aside from the real and subsetting it under a superobject of the ordinary.

Agential realism provides an onto-epistemological foundation for how games are emergent within the real and everyday life. As emergent within the real, games are (re)verberations. In the one sense games verberate specific transformations in experiences of our doings. In the other sense games reverberate specific manifestations and understandings of the real. A game as well as ordinary life are likewise real, a game is not a subobject to ordinary life. Our everyday practices and our specific ideological and political orientations in society will be part in enacting what emerge as game and what emerge as ordinary.

With this view it becomes explicit that many of our everyday doings and what these put in motion to some extent are the same, although they make emerge very different experiences. One example that probably can be witnessed near pre-schools all over the world is the transformation of "leaving a child at pre-school" into "racing with a child to see who gets to pre-school first". The underlying doings are much the same, the child will be left at pre-school, but the experiences for both parent and child are different. The experience is verberated by the game, however this very simple game will still reverberate the political ideal in society calling for the parent to leave the child at pre-school to be able to go to work.

The main point to make of all this is not that anything can be a game or a game can be everything. What is more important is how a rethinking of games can influence how games are analyzed, designed and produced. If the main question analysing games are shifted from what a game is or what a game is about, focus can be put on how did this emerge as a game and what does it put in motion. Games then can be figured without being pre-bound under specific categories or objects, they need not be normatively safe, pleasurable, and unserious. As such we believe that ethical considerations can be broadened. Furthermore, our short discussion on how multiplayer experiences are enacted in the Soul series shows how avoiding dichotomies and predefined structures in agency and subject-object relations can enable a larger space for design.

In our continuing studies we want to dig deeper into different games and design of games to see if the diffraction patterns that emerge adds to the understanding of games as (re)verberations. In parallel with this paper we are working on a design framework, ReVerb, which approach games from this perspective. The name ReVerb is inspired by the acoustic term reverb — how sound is affected by a specific space and vice versa the simulation of a specific space through sound. Embedded in term ReVerb is a focus on verbs as the anticipated doings for specific practices, while “re” points to the temporally situated enactments, reverberating specific understandings of, as well as ideological and political orientations in society.

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