

Game/r - Play/er - Bio-Object. Exploring posthuman values in video game research

Justyna Janik

Faculty of Management and Social Communication

Jagiellonian University in Kraków

Introduction

The posthuman approach is gaining more and more attention in the field of game studies. As it is a wide category, the research itself also contains a wide spread of topics, from non-human play (Wirman 2014, Gualeni & Westerlaken 2016) and research methods based on Latourian actor-network theory (Giddings 2008, Jessen & Jessen 2014), to the ontology of the game object (Bogost 2010, Fizek 2017). However, there is still a need for works that would focus on the creation of meaning inside the player-game relation and the play process itself, which, at the same time, would emphasize the ethical foundation of a posthuman approach focused on the human relation with technology. With that in mind, I will follow the premises of critical posthumanism, especially in the work of Karen Barad (2007). As a means of theorizing the player-game relation in dialogue with these premises, I shall introduce the idea of bio-object (Kantor 2004), which simultaneously emphasises both the equality and the uniqueness of human and non-human actants in the player.

What is posthumanism?

In order to construct my argument correctly, the term posthumanism should be specified. The term can be confusing in the breadth of its application, and in how many different, sometimes very contradictory approaches can be found in this category – from the post-dualistic approach of philosophical/cultural/critical posthumanism, through the feminism of new materialism, to humanocentric transhumanism (Ferrando 2013). In this paper, I would like to follow the premises of philosophical/critical posthumanism, which can be perceived as more affirmative alternative to traditional humanism and antihumanism in its search for a new way to describe the human subject without focusing on the “crisis of the human condition” (Braidotti 2014: 100-101). What seems to be the most important premise of this approach is a non-anthropocentric view of reality, in which “(...) humans are no longer monarchs of being, but are instead *among* beings, *entangled* in beings, and *implicated* in other beings” (Bryant 2011: 40). In this context, it is very easy to see that philosophical/critical posthumanism is very much not only a methodological statement, but also an ethical one. By shifting the human position from the centre, we start to listen to the voices of non-human actants (both living and non-living) that are not only part of the same reality, but are also its co-creators. However, as Rosi Braidotti points out in *The Posthuman* (2013), there is still need for a discussion on what a posthuman ethics would really mean, and on how we should apply

posthuman philosophy in a way that preserves its core premises. This seems to be a core problem of philosophical posthumanism: can we escape an anthropocentric language of the analysis, when we are still humans? Of course, a fully affirmative response would be a rather utopian one, but it is our responsibility as researchers to try to get as close to it as we can.

This question is just as important in the context of video games, which are not only created by humans, but – which is particularly significant in this context – in most cases are created in a way that places the human player in the centre of the experience. If, as researchers, we decide to stand only in this central position, there is the distinct possibility that we would miss an important mechanism or phenomenon, which would make our reflection incomplete.

Therefore, while I would still perceive a connection between the player and the video game in the context of a relational network – similarly to Thomas Apperley (2010) and Seth Giddings (2009) – I would also want to take a step away from the science and technology studies paradigm and make a shift towards the critical posthumanism of Karen Barad. In this way, I will be able not only to focus on how the player and the game object exist inside a complex, multi-actant relational network, but also to zoom in closer to the intimacy of single-player gameplay where two autonomous actants define each other's boundaries and properties, staying together yet apart.

In these terms, this description might seem to be a rather general one. I would like to add the concept of the bio-object, developed by the artist and dramatist Tadeusz Kantor (2004: 363-406), to my analysis, not only because, as I shall argue, it fits the premises of the critical posthumanist approach I have already outlined, but also because, while remaining within this posthumanist paradigm, it more closely reflects the nature of the video game (and the various relations between it and the player) as the object of aesthetic consideration.

Game/r - Play/er - Bio-Object

The idea of the bio-object emerged from Tadeusz Kantor's aesthetical explorations concerning the nature of art (especially theatre) and its inextricable connection to life and reality. While his style and approach to art evolved organically over time, we still can distinguish the topics he was enduringly interested in. One of these was the idea of objects, their meaning and their place in the surrounding reality. He was interested in how things – ready-made, taken from everyday life, sometimes garbage-like – can become "L'OBJET D'ART" (Kantor 2004: 397, 415-416), and in how autonomous objects can be perceived in an aesthetic context. As Ewa Domańska (2008) pointed out, Kantor's objects are in fact foreign to the human mind, because they do not mimic anything – they escape the process of anthropomorphisation or symbolisation (19–20). We can find these objects not only in Kantor's artistic installations, but also in his plays. Here, these autonomous, worn-out and grounded-in-reality objects started to be not just simple props, but a part of a structure he termed the bio-object.

Kantor coined the notion of the bio-object to describe the special relation between the actor and the stage object that is established during the performance of the play. The actor uses this object on stage, but not as a prop that she can liberally use as she wishes. Objects, as Kantor put it, "created an indivisible totality with the actors" (in Kobialka 2009: 359). The actor not only animates the object, but also becomes its "living organs" (Kantor 2004, p. 397). It is even visible in the names

that can be found in the script of the play, which seem more like a description of the hybrid and its functions than a simple tag: the Man with a Sack and its Unknown Content, the Woman Drowned in the Bathtub, the Helpless Man with a Table. The actor makes the object “alive,” and, without her, it is just a shell on the stage, but at the same time it is the object that defines the moves and motives of the actor.

This situation can also be applied to an analysis of the bond between the player and the video game in the moment of gameplay (see Janik 2017a; 2017b): the presence of the player animates the game, but it is the game that creates a frame for the player’s actions. However, what is special about the idea of the bio-object is that both the human and non-human actant are equal in this qualitative new unity and, as equals, they are both the main conduit of the play’s meaning. This is possible because of the unstable nature of this connection: there is a continuous struggle inside the bio-object about which side – human or non-human – will gain advantage over the other; either the actor/player dominates the object and uses it as she wishes, or the object/game imposes itself over the human and confines her movements. This never-ending rivalry between two individual forces – mind and matter – builds tensions which, in the end, resolve in the production of new meanings (Pleśniarowicz 1990: 35).

Examples of this struggle can be observed in stage situations in which the materiality of the object imposes itself over the actor who is trying to manipulate it (for example, the actor can trip over the ragged body of a mannequin, or an elaborate mechanical structure might just get stuck in the middle of an action). However, this struggle is arguably even more noticeable in the situation of digital game play: when the player is skillful, we can say that she is in a more dominant position, but the moment the game level becomes too hard to beat, the tipping point moves towards the game object. This rivalry becomes most prominent when the player starts to subversively explore the boundaries of the game environment, by, for instance, making some changes to the game script (such as modding, hacking or using cheat codes), or when glitches manifest themselves. If the former is about establishing human dominance over the game object, the latter is about exposing the presence of the game’s digital materiality: the glitch is often something unplanned and unexpected that can interfere with the player’s actions or even her perception of the game environment (for example, by breaking the narrative involvement (Janik 2017b)).

This is the moment when we should ask the question about the operational rules of how it is possible that in this rivalry new meanings are produced. In Kantor’s theory, this happens because of two reasons. Firstly, meaning is produced due to the aforementioned instability of the connection between actants – the bond between actor and object is not exactly stable. Second, the production of meaning is possible because of the specific status of the Kantorian object, which is not simply defined by its given, human functionality, but has the capacity to define and transform the human actants it engages.

In various interpretation of Kantor’s writing, this process is often perceived as an objectification of the human actor and an attendant subjectification of the object, which is perceived as degrading for the human condition. However, I believe that the notion of the bio-object needs to be reread in the context of critical posthumanism, to shake off the anthropocentric inclination of the supposed depersonalisation of the actor. Therefore – despite some possible differences between her and Kantor’s views on the subject of materiality, which require further discussion – I would like to use

Karen Barad's concept of intra-actions (2007) to fill in the vague spots in Kantor's writing and arrive at an understanding of the idea of the bio-object that can be applied to .

Intra-actions and bio-objects

First of all, for Karen Barad, reality, and materiality, is not something that is given and stable. It is constituted by phenomena, which she perceives as "relations without preexisting relata" (Barad 2007: 139). The components of the phenomena (subject/objects/entities) do not have predetermined boundaries or properties. The agential cut, that distinguishes and shapes components inside these phenomena, is only possible on the basis of a specific agential intra-action. Before the intra-action, agents simply do not exist. In other words, by this understanding, reality is composed of "things-in-phenomena" (140) that gain their individual properties only through specific material-discursive practices, which are "ongoing agential intra-actions of the world" (149). In Barad's ont-epistemological agential realism, intra-actions replace interaction, because there are no determined, independent entities preceding relations. This also changes the status of agency, which is not something that actants have and can use, but rather a dynamic force that happens between them. By not differentiating between human and non-human agency, Barad wants to escape the anthropocentric tendencies that can unintentionally appear when using the notion of agency in traditional understanding, while, at the same time, also emphasizing its transformative power (149).

This transformative power that bonds actants can manifest on many different layers in video games. On the very basic, material level, the player makes changes inside the game environment – finding resources, eliminating enemies, solving riddles, and so on. In the opposite direction, the player's eye-hand coordination might improve because of the hours she spends playing a game, which could also result in some muscle pain or tension because of the requirement to sit in one position while playing – both of which represent physical transformations wrought upon the human player by the game. This can also happen on a more cognitive (symbolic?) level, when the game transforms us emotionally, by exposing us to new experiences – for example, while playing socially and politically involved games. Sometimes, these transformations are connected in one big ongoing process that leads us to a final decision. Many computer role-playing games allow (or require) us to make choices, but we should also answer a question about how many of our decisions were not based on previously calculated strategies of play, but changed in the last moment, because of our involvement with in-game characters. How many players choose a paragon's path for their Shepard in *Mass Effect 3* (2012), but did not cure the genophage, because they refuse to sacrifice Mordin Solas in order to do it?

This seems to be well attuned with the concept of the bio-object and video games: the player and the game object are constantly reconfiguring each other, but also do not exist in this form outside this connection. As Linus de Petris and Anders Falk (2017) rightly pointed out when interpreting game(play) in Barad's terminology: "a gamer or a game is not made meaningful without the practice of gameplay". By analyzing the example of the *Dark Souls* series (2010-2017), they emphasize the fact that these games' multiplayer features are, in fact, indeterminate – multiplayer mechanics may just manifest themselves while the player is focusing on her own singleplayer gameplay, and, in some situations, the human subject is not even aware that she is experiencing it. This example also highlights another important point in Barad's theory about objects and subject.

Because agency is not attached to any of particular entities, and is instead conceptualized as a dynamic force acting between entities, the strict division between the object and subject is no longer needed. Everything is in flux through the process of intra-action: we can be controlling our playable character one minute, but, in the next minute, they can just do something unexpected and we turn from an active subject to a powerless observer (de Petris & Falk 2017).

Meaningful playfulness of the intra-actions

It seems, then, that the rivalry inside the bio-object can be interpreted as this dynamic force of intra-action that is constantly changing in intensity, which results in the shifting of the boundaries between, and the changing properties of, the player and the game. A good example is the instance of a glitch, which could be interpret as the manifestation of the game's agency (Janik 2017b), but which, in this context, would instead be understood as the manifestation of the game's autonomy that appeared as a result of the act of play with the player. The game broadens its borders – even if only for a moment, since these borders will be redrawn again in the moment when the player regains her dominant position by, for example, using the glitch to her advantage.

This aspect of the bio-object seems to be very well attuned to Barad's agential realism. Kantor and Barad appear to be in agreement on the fact that, meaning is created through specific material-discursive practices (Barad 2007:148; Kantor 2004: 396-398). However, what seems special about the bio-object idea, and what Barad does not examine at length in her work, is the different status of object of aesthetic consideration.

While potentially every object can become a part of a bio-object, not every connection between a human and a non-human actant is one. A specific material-discursive practice is required in order for such a connection to result in the establishment of a bio-object – I would argue that, in the context of the video game, play would constitute such a practice. One can say that, by combining Kantor's writing with the concept of intra-action, we are narrowing Barad's theory to think more about poetics, about how the aesthetic meaning can emerge through what she calls "material-discursive practices". Using the two conceptualities together, we are putting games in the context of a very specific theatre, which was especially interested in what the relation between human and non-human can tell us about very specific and hard-to-grasp ideas, like real(ness), illusion, memory, death and love. Those are important categories for us, as humans, but what Kantor's theatre sought to reveal was the extent to which they are always co-created to the same degree by objects.

Using those two terms together, we do not have to think about meanings only in the context of transformation in one or the other actant – about something that appears, in a way, "inside" or within the borders of the actant. We can focus on meanings as emerging through the bio-object connection, because of the intra-actively created possibilities for that in the properties of human and non-human elements. A good example of this is fiction (understood as story) that, as Kantor (in Kobialka 2009) put it, is "continuously disappearing and reappearing, "shone[shining - JJ] through" the "life" of these bio-objects" (359). The fiction, or for that matter any kind of narrative in a game, does not have to appear if there is no need, no response from both sides of the bio-object. Therefore, we can play *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) as an epic Dragonborn, role-playing

every quest, but in another play-through we can just speedrun through the entire game, with the fiction not being a part of our experience. It can also happen during the same play experience, when, for example, we are struggling to beat a monster and shift our involvement to the game's rules to develop new strategies, but after the victory we start again thinking about Geralt of Rivia's love life (in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015).

In a sense, any form of interpretation resulting from the playing of a game can be understood as an example of the meanings that can emerge from the tension inside the player-game bio-object. While most of the time interpretations retain the form of indeterminate phenomena (like thoughts or impressions), they can become more concrete because of the specific intra-actions of human and non-human that form the bio-object. There is no shortage of explicit examples of this, including all kinds of fan works – fan arts, fan fictions, fan videos – or just simple comments on discussion threads.

Once again, the glitch seems to be one of the phenomena that allows us to see this process of the creation of new meanings very clearly: the glitch is (in most cases) the outcome of the player-game intra-actions, and it is a manifestation of the game object's autonomy. While there is still a rivalry inside the bio-object, as I mentioned before, the player wants to regain the dominant position. One way of dealing with glitch is glitching, but we can also find a lot of glitch-related fan works, which seem to be an attempt to rebuilt our position as more “agential” – at least in our head. For example, because of the glitched software, people that played *Pokémon Go* (2016) could approach a pocket monster that consisted of two different figures glitching into one. This situation triggered the imagination of some players to draw pictures of the quite horrifying resulting hybrids.

This kind of interpretative meaning generation is by no means restricted to players' attempts to make sense of glitches. Another, not glitched-based example, are erotic fan works, like *Overwatch* (2016) porn, that result from the encounter between the game's audiovisual and narrative properties and the player's needs. Moreover, interpretation does not have to manifest only in fan culture, but also in other cultural domains – including academia. A good example is Olli Tapio Leino's engagement with the death loop he experienced while playing *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010): his development of a theory of the game object as a playable artifact on the basis of this experience (Leino 2012) can, in this sense, be understood as an attempt to regain the dominant position in a situation where the game had left him with little to no control over his activity.

This specific situation of emerging meanings is also possible because of the nuanced ontological status of the bio-object. Even if the human and non-human actants appear as one, the bio-object is neither the object/game, nor the actor/player. It emerges though the actions of both, and connects them on the level of their different materialities (respectively both digital and physical) through performative, meaning-generative processes (or intra-actions). In order for this to happen, human and non-human actants need to remain linked but distinct. In other words, while constituting the bio-object, the human being does not transcend her human condition, and the game object does not stop being a digital object. This also follows the premises of Zylińska's posthumanistic bioethics (2007), in which she combines Levinas and Derrida to show how being-in-difference with non-humans would help us to better think about the Other we are facing in a situation of mutual connection and influence.

In this line of thought, the game object become the Other, that not only shapes us – as well as we it – but also makes us responsible for itself and our actions towards it. The bio-object idea helps us to see the duality of the game object as, on the one hand, a playable artefact (Leino 2012), in which digital materiality and processes are intertwined, and, on the other hand, a space for material-discursive practices where meanings are produced. The (intra-)action of play become an act of communication (Majkowski 2015). I would argue that you can see this otherness in every game object; however, it is usually hidden, in order to build a cohesive illusion of the game as an environment or world. It is easier to spot in games like *Undertale* (2015) or *Toki Doki Literature Club* (2017), where the diegetic layer of the game is intertwined with the non-diegetic layer. In both cases, the player has to face the game, which in the final moments blocks her from either loading her previous saves or even finishing the game if she does not delete them. We are not just playing around IN a game, we are playing around WITH the game. The game becomes our partner in play, the Other imposes its otherness over us.

Conclusion

Using the bio-object idea in relation to the paradigm of critical posthumanism gives us an opportunity to “hear” the voice of the game object, that sometimes can be hidden beneath its anthropocentric design. Analyzing the video game within this framework helps us understand how the game object and the player not only influence each other, but become partners in creating meanings. As I mentioned in the beginning of this paper, posthumanism is, by definition, an ethical approach to reality, in which the human subject is no longer thought of as being in the centre of reality. Therefore, by using Kantor’s idea of the bio-object and Barad’s concept of intra-actions, we are not only creating analytic tools to better understand the relation between the player and the game object, we are also shifting our perception about play, coming to understand it as being always an ethical experience.

Games

- FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS. Obsidian Entertainment, PC, 2010.
MASS EFFECT 3. BioWare, PC, 2012.
OVERWATCH. Blizzard Entertainment, PC, 2016.
POKÉMON GO. Niantic, mobile, 2016.
THE ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM. Bethesda Game Studios, PC, 2011.
THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT. CD Projekt RED, PC, 2015
TOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB, Team Salvato, PC, 2017.
UNDERTALE. Toby Fox, PC, 2015.

References

- Apperley, T. (2009). *Gaming rhythms: Play and counterplay from the situated to the global*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.
Barad, K. M. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Bogost, I. (2012). *Alien phenomenology, or, What it's like to be a thing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Braidotti, R. (2014). *Po człowieku* [The Posthuman]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Bryant, L.R. (2011). *The Democracy of Objects*. Open Humanities Press.
<http://www.openhumanitiespress.org/books/titles/the-democracy-of-objects/>
- Ferrando, F. (2013). "Posthumanism, transhumanism, antihumanism, metahumanism, and new materialisms: Differences and relations". *Existenz*, 8(2), 26–32.
- Fizek, S. (2017). *Self-playing Games: Rethinking the State of Digital Play*. Paper presented at The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, Kraków 2017.
- Giddings, S. (2008). "Events and Collusions: A Glossary for the Microethnography of Video Game Play". *Games and Culture*, 2(4), 144 - 157
- Janik, J. (2017a) „Gra/cz : idea bio-objektu w grach wideo”. *Ekrany*. - 2017 : Nieludzkie kino, 6 (40), 100-103.
- Janik, J. (2017b). "Glitched perception: beyond the transparency and visibility of the video game object", *TransMissions: Journal of Film and Media Studies* 2(2): [TBA]
- Jessen, J. D., & Jessen, C. (2014). Games as Actors - Interaction, Play, Design, and Actor Network Theory. *International Journal on Advances in Intelligent Systems*, 3-4 (7), 412 – 422.
- Kantor, T. (2004). *Teatr śmierci: Teksty z lat, 1975-1984*. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.
- Kantor, Tadeusz. 2004. *Teatr śmierci: Teksty z lat, 1975-1984*. Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.
- Kobialka, M. (2009). *Further on, nothing: Tadeusz Kantor's theatre*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Leino, O. T. (2012). "Death Loop as a Feature", *Game Studies: the international journal of computer game research* 12(2): http://gamestudies.org/1202/articles/death_loop_as_a_feature , date accessed 3 September 2017.
- Majkowski, T. Z. (2015). „Różnojęzyczność gier wideo a sytuacja gracza: rozpoznanie wstępne [Video Game Heteroglossia and Player Situation: Initial Diagnosis]”, *Wielogłos. Pismo Wydziału Polonistyki Uj*, 25(3).
- Petris de, L. & Falk, A. (2017). *(Re)framing computer games with(in) agential*
- Pleśniarowicz, Krzysztof. 1990. *Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora*. Chotomów: Verba.
- Realism*. Paper presented at The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, Kraków 2017.
- Westerlaken, M. & Gualeni, S. (2016). Situated Knowledges through Game Design: A Transformative Exercise with Ants. Paper presented at The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference, Malta 2016.
- Wirman, H. (2014). Games for/with Strangers: Captive Orangutan (*Pongo Pygmaeus*) Touch Screen Play, *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*, 30, 103-113.
- Zylinska, J. (2009). *Bioethics in the age of new media*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.