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Short chains of action

Action and subject constitution in computer games.

The point, computer gamers report, and the main reason for their desire to play, is the possibility to *act* for themselves. This is considered the biggest difference to other media experiences. While film and television put the viewer in a “passive” role, computer games, the argument goes, require the player to be more active. Here, you can *do something yourself*.

But what does this mean exactly? If gamers focus so resolutely on *action*, it seems sensible to ask about the background and, independent of individual computer games and game experiences, to consider the concept of action itself. Most current approaches in game studies would discuss the action concept – to put it succinctly – in terms of ‘interactivity’; certainly an iridescent term, and worse: a term that systematically obstructs access to certain questions. For one, interactivity bypasses the question of action in a peculiar way by directing the focus to an in-between: Action takes place between players, between the rules of the game and the player, or between player and narration. Second, the model of interactivity unquestionably presupposes subjects as actors/agents; becoming the basis for their interactions with the game mechanics, a narrative, the available roles, the psychological gratifications, and so on. And third, interactivity is characterized as an essentially positive and satisfying experience that appears timeless and does not seem to be anchored in a historical or ideological context.

So what does it mean for a *self* to ‘do something’? And why is this active role associated with pleasure? Is an intact, self-empowered self always implicated in our notion of action?

Possible answers to these questions will be developed here by questioning the action concept itself. The first section will look at some texts on the concept of agency in game studies. Then we will problematize agency in general, in order to subsequently determine its function in computer games. Finally, we will propose an alternative to the concept of interactivity.

Elephants in the Room: Action and Subject in Game Studies

Although interactivity is often postulated as a special property of computer games, there are hardly any general reflections on the concept of action or subject formation in game studies. The *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*¹, for example, does not discuss these terms, merely the genre designation “action games” appears in the index. Not so in the case of interactivity: Here one will find many entries in the index and some articles in the book. For example, interactivity is used to explain immersion effects of computer games and the involvement of the

¹ Raessens, Joost; Goldstein, Jeffrey H. (eds.): *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press: 2005.

player in a narrative² or, depending on the type of interactivity, it is used to devise a system of genre designations for computer games.³

In this use of the term, interactivity always refers to something else. One almost gets the impression that game studies avoids thinking about ‘action’. Are action and subject the *elephants in the room*? The thing no one wants to see?

Interactivity, on the other hand, is becoming the central concept of the computer game: “‘Interactivity’ isn’t just about giving players choices; it pretty much completely defines the game medium.”⁴ And Salen/Zimmerman⁵ spell out this definition in several steps: As action between the player and the game, which is primarily about emotional and intellectual participation; as action between the player and the user interface, in which functional aspects such as the gamepad and the game buttons are addressed; and as action between the player and game elements, i.e. the decision-making possibilities and the forms of their presentation. Finally, another, last form of interaction takes place between players, for example, when they form fan cultures.

Quite contrary to considerations like this, we think that computer games *negate*, however illusory, the many mediating instances. Computer games *obliterate* the postponement, the in-between. Cause and effect are coupled directly; and by linking action straight to consequence, the in-between, the inter-active is virtually eliminated. If computer game theories often focus on narration and play, this too would have to be relativized, because action and subject constitution hardly play a role there either.

The elephants in the room of game studies, however, cast shadows; because the difficulty of the interactivity concept to explain the action dimension becomes quite evident in some theoretical approaches.

In his book *Half-real*,⁶ Jesper Juul drafts the following definition of the computer game: The first point is unsurprising: “Rules”. But subsequent points are interesting for our concern: with “4. Player Effort” and “5. Player attached to Outcome”, Juul tries to approach the phenomenon of agency and empowerment. Unfortunately, however, he restricts himself to the common perspective of psychology: “The emotional attachment of the player to the outcome is a psychological feature of the game activity.”⁷

Agency or “effectance” approaches, such as those taken up by Christoph Klimmt, pursue a similar line of reasoning:

“Computer games respond directly and immediately to user input. Every (permissible) input is followed by a reaction of the game program, be it an explosion, a stock purchase, or a shot at a soccer goal.”⁸

² Raynauld, Isabelle: Click reading: screenwriting and screen-reading practices in film and multimedia fictions. In: Raessens/Goldstein, op. cit., pp. 81-95, here: p. 85f.

³ Wolf, Mark J. P.: Genre and the Video Game. In: Raessens/Goldstein, op. cit., pp. 193-204.

⁴ Salen, Katie; Zimmerman, Eric: Gamedesign and meaningful play. In: Raessens/Goldstein, op. cit., pp. 59-79, here p. 70; Salen/Zimmermann cite Walter Specter.

⁵ Ibid., p. 70f.

⁶ Juul, Jesper: *Half-real: video games between real rules and fictional worlds*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2005.

⁷ Ibid, p. 40.

⁸ Klimmt, Christoph: Unterhaltungserleben beim Computerspielen. In: Mitgutsch, Konstantin; Rosenstingl, Herbert (eds.): *Faszination Computerspielen: Theorie – Kultur – Erleben*. Vienna: Braumüller 2008, pp. 7-17, here p. 8 (transl. W./A.).

When he further writes that the close coupling of action and consequence “trigger[s] the immediate experience of one’s own causal efficacy [= pleasure],”⁹ this comes quite close to our perspective.

In other approaches, emotions and motives are linked to cognitive functions, and we end up back at the debate on violence and addiction, which – it seems – almost every theorization of computer games has to engage with. But why do the explanations stay at the level of the individual and the psyche? They neglect to address action also from the perspective of cultural, social, and historical explanatory models. This fixation on the individual remains incomprehensible when one considers that game theories also play a significant role in the social sciences.

If gameplay is understood solely as individual experience, or as ‘rules in action’, then the collective dimension, actions as historical and socio-cultural manifestations, is lost from view.

“A game’s gameplay is the degree and nature of the interactivity that the game includes, i.e., how the player is able to interact with the game-world and how that game-world reacts to the choice the player makes”.¹⁰

Again, it’s all about interactivity; agency is once again out of the picture.

Agency

If we return to the popular distinction between the ‘active’ computer game and ‘passive’ media such as film and television, it is initially striking that the division into active and passive is accompanied by manifold evaluative connotations. And as a matter of course, an active position seems superior to the passive one. This is true on the level of language, in grammar, where the subject ‘rules’ the object by means of the verb, and more generally, insofar as agency is most closely associated with hierarchical notions, notions of power, the possibility of asserting goals and realizing one’s own desires. Agency/power is initially directed at objects and at nature; phylogenetically, it finds a stable basis in the struggle for the survival of the species.

In addition, however – and here the matter becomes more serious – agency/power is also directed at other people. The experience of being forced out of the role of subject and finding oneself in the role of *object*, of becoming the object of someone else’s wishes, goals, assaults, or exercise of power is traumatic; and at the same time it is part of everyday life; in every office it determines, however moderately, the interaction with the boss. Moreover, at least ontogenetically, one’s own path by no means begins in the position of subject; the experience of oscillating between subject and object roles will continue throughout life. Active and passive correlate with gender stereotypes; at the same time, sexual experiences in particular seem suitable for switching between both roles pleasurably, and for enjoying passivity as well as activity.

The separation into active and passive, subject and object is certainly very fundamental in human history. Not in all cultures, however, do active and passive, subject and object diverge as sharply polarized as they do in the Western understanding of the world and of the self. The *concept* of the subject is – in contrast to the grammatical category – historically more recent. With a prehistory in antiquity and in the figure of the ancient hero, which Horkheimer/Adorno reconstruct in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the subject is an achievement of the bourgeois revolution.

Only the bourgeoisie imposes the burden of action on the individual. Metaphysics recedes as a basis and an abutment and relates the bourgeois subject back to itself: Supported solely by the

⁹ Ibid. (transl. and add. W./A.).

¹⁰ Juul, *Half-real*, op. cit. p. 87; Juul cites Rouse.

ideal of reason and the reality of his proper interest, the individual must now assume sole responsibility for the goals of action, criteria of action, and possible culpability.

In the ideal of sovereignty, the bourgeoisie – curiously – orients itself towards its historical opponent, the nobility, the sovereign. On the side of the creative, in the sovereign production of the new, towards the creator God.

In the bourgeois model of action, however, various other lines intersect: The economic basis is the coupling of science and industry, which permits mastery of nature on an unprecedented scale, which renders nature docile as an *object* and leaves behind any other relationship to nature as a romantic remnant. Capital ownership, economic independence is the self-evident basis for being able to act as a bourgeois subject. The bourgeoisie adopts its ethos of work from the monastery and Protestantism; work becomes the dominant form in which action and agency are thought and codified. On the ideological surface, rhetorics of ‘freedom’ (freedom of action) and individuality, of individualism, become dominant; on the political level, a web develops that combines – quite emancipatively – models of equilibrium (market as a reconciliation of conflicting interests) with a reservation against direct, frontal exercise of domination; domination is shifted inward, to self-mastery. The structure aims to avoid direct encroachment by other agents (and the slide into the role of the object). The Western model of democracy has its focus here.

In the course of the bourgeois era, this bourgeois model of subject and action was confronted politically and practically with deviating facts, above all with the fact that the majority of the population works but does not at all experience itself as acting sovereignly when separated from capital ownership. The rhetoric of self-responsibility/ability to act/agency reaches a limit here.

And in parallel, the concept was subjected to a fundamental critique in the realm of philosophy, ranging from Nietzsche to the French ‘subject-critical’ philosophies of the sixties. At least in philosophy, no one now advocates it without reservation.

This does not mean, however, that it is not effective and powerful in practice. Our hypothesis is rather that the bourgeois subject of action – and be it as an undead, as a revenant – is celebrating a joyous resurrection, including in the unsuspected sphere of the *game* and especially the computer game.

Play, pleasure, ‘para-action’

In modern societies, there is a gap between the constant challenge to be a subject or to act as such, and the possibilities to experience oneself as an acting subject. The type of individualized action that has an open outcome is lost in the routines and assurances of society; existential risks and uncertainty, on the other hand, are less and less related to individual actions.

The computer game offers uncertainties in the outcomes of action as rationally justifiable options and opens up room for maneuver. In the game, on the one hand, action is constantly demanded without, on the other hand, being linked to the established scales of economic utility. Accordingly, actions take place in the ‘useless’ time, the leisure time.

The bourgeois subject appears in the computer game as a revenant, not in its original form and function. In this media context of popular culture, the subject will only be able to unfold its productivity in the sphere of game worlds. The effects of this subjectivation, however, can then certainly fulfill social functions...

In addition, the production of the subject in the computer game is directly linked to pleasure, passion, and dedication. Game theory points to a direct link between need and pleasure, which can only be explained by the alleged social non-functionality and unproductivity of the game.¹¹

The fact that games are ‘unproductive’ is paradoxically part of their productivity as a subject generator. By acting, the player draws the line between the game and a social reality that suggests freedom of action, but ultimately cannot guarantee it. The modern critique of the subject can therefore, for the time being, retain plausibility in relation to the core social sphere, while in the – rather marginal – game culture subjects continue to happily reproduce themselves through action.

While in modernity the individual is in tension with society resulting in conflicts,¹² in the computer game individual action is perceived as pleasurable precisely where it leaves the system of social restrictions behind; and it makes little difference whether action means the unerring shooting of aliens or the skillful stacking of falling rectangles.

In the computer game, the scope of action expands. At its periphery, a special space emerges which becomes controllable by the player’s ‘*para-actions*’. There are well-known theories about ‘parasocial interaction’ in mass media; derived from these, but distinct from them, we propose the term ‘para-action’ in order to describe all actions in computer games that imply and produce an acting subject.

In parasocial interactions, the conversant mechanisms of communication are simulated. In the canonical text on the subject by Horton/Wohl,¹³ the game show host on television is ascribed the function of communicatively involving the viewers in the events and thus maintaining the illusion of a face-to-face relationship. The decisive factor here is the viewer’s willingness to actively support this illusion. In this sense, one could speak much more of interactivity with television than with the computer. Viewers must actively decide whether or not to accept the role offered by the game show host in the illusionary communication process. Likewise, they can avoid the televisual offers of intimacy, participation, and interaction without any consequences for themselves.

The fact that they lack any direct consequences in social reality connects parasocial interaction in television with para-action in computer games. In contrast to parasocial interaction, para-action does not center on communication, but on actions or the ‘real’ pleasure of directly coupled action/reaction. Para-actions, therefore, do not necessarily have to be interactive. They virtually suggest that mediating communication does not intervene. After all, their point is precisely that they create direct cause-effect relationships.

In computer games, acquired skills are tested on the game’s objects and are continually perfected. In first-person shooters, for example, para-actions such as shooting and not being hit improve the available weapons and shields – and thus options for continuing action. The ‘weapon’ is therefore not a weapon, as folk pedagogy would have us believe, but the accumulation, opening, and enabling of further para-actions. It is an agency power-up, a further enhancement of the ability to act, such as an accelerator in a racing game or a new item in a simulation or role-playing game.

If one understands the space of possibility of the computer game as a space for action in which the available para-actions are evaluated according to their individual level of pleasure and

¹¹ Huizinga, Johan: *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* [1944]. London. Routledge 1980, p. 8ff.

¹² ... one of the main subject areas of sociology ...

¹³ Horton, Donald; Wohl, R. Richard: Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction. In: *Psychiatry*, no. 19, 1956, pp. 215-229.

enjoyment, then its social function becomes evident: The computer game provides relief from the real conflict between the ideal of the bourgeois action model and its actual social restrictions.¹⁴

Short chains of action, violence

What has been said also offers a new perspective on the more than tiresome question of violence. It is undeniable that fictional violence plays a prominent role, at least in shooters and role-playing games, and it is equally undeniable that the well-meaning scare tactics of educators and politicians fall short of the mark. Violence is first of all found at the level of content, action patterns, and iconographies. If we look for the essential difference between the game and the feature film, for example, which has drastic scenes of violence too, we find that the special feature of the game lies in the fact that the player leaves the role of the eyewitness and switches to the role of the actor, not to say the perpetrator. We believe that what is at stake here is the issue of subject position. And further, that this issue is more dominant and significant than the visual surface and the pixels of splattered blood. We would like to argue that the violence in computer games, despite all appearances, is only a mode of *representation*; and for a structural context that lies beneath this surface and that has only a very mediated connection with violence in ‘reality’.

A key is provided by Norbert Elias in his famous, not uncontroversial theory of civilization,¹⁵ which describes human history in a large-scale trajectory as a process of increasing civilization. Elias sees this process of civilization, and especially the historical transition to modernity, as characterized by a profound ambivalence: For on the one hand, civilization means that the social space is pacified and immediate physical violence is pushed back from everyday life. The taboo on violence – or the monopolization of violence by the state – is a great achievement; civilized people have learned to pursue their interests and resolve conflicts without resorting to the means of physical violence.

At the same time, however, this means – Elias leaves no doubt about this – that a tremendous *burden* is imposed on the subjects. The taboo on violence demands a high degree of self-control, precisely because violence is so obvious as a means of enforcement. The whole human psychological structure is designed to react to demanding situations with great emotion, quickly and spontaneously; it is precisely this mode of reaction that must be *blocked* in order to make civilization possible. According to Elias, civilization consists in a “social constraint towards self-constraint”.¹⁶ An elaborate socialization process, social institutions, and regulatory apparatuses work together to build a *system of inhibitions*. This is *ingrained* in the subjects, i.e. so deeply anchored in the psychological structure that the subject is hardly able to transcend them deliberately. External compulsion – here Elias meets Foucault’s ‘disciplines’ – is transformed into a system of internal compulsion. The price, however, is that the friction, the conflict, which would otherwise be an external one, is also shifted into the interior of the subject; the subjects live

¹⁴ Against this background – and this would most closely parallel our argument – ludological computer game theories consider players as designers of action spaces rather than interpreters of a text (cf.: Eskelinen, Markku: Towards computer game studies. In: Wardrip-Fruin, Noah; Harrigan, Pat (eds.): First person. New media as story, performance, and game. Cambridge, (Mass.)/London: MIT Press 2004, pp. 36-44, here: p. 38f.).

¹⁵ Elias, Norbert: The Civilizing Process. Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations [1939]. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell 2003, see esp.: pp. 363-448. Elias’ theses, as said, have not remained without objection: The most pointed counterposition has been formulated by Hans Peter Dürr (D., H. P.: Obszönität und Gewalt. Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozess. Vol. 3., Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1993).

¹⁶ Elias, op. cit., p. 365.

their whole life in the conflict between their inner impulses and the imposed system of inhibitions, which is now also part of their interior.¹⁷

The idea thus outlined is interesting not because of its reference to manifest violence. Rather, Elias takes it further by explaining what actually distinguishes the called-for ‘civilized’ reactions from the former, less civilized ones. And his central idea is that with the process of civilization and modernity, *the chains of action lengthen in significant ways*. In this way, Elias takes up precisely the more general question of action and agency that is the subject here. Modernity, Elias says, is characterized above all by the fact that the social apparatus becomes more complex.

“[The more differentiated society becomes], the larger grows the number of functions and thus of people on whom the individual constantly depends in all his actions, from the simplest and most commonplace to the more complex and uncommon. As more and more people must attune their conduct to that of others, the web of actions must be organized more and more strictly and accurately, if each individual action is to fulfil its social function. Individuals are compelled to regulate their conduct in an increasingly differentiated, more even and more stable manner.”¹⁸

Social complexity thus turns into a compulsion for coordination; and this into the demand for individuals to discipline their own behavior. The individual is socially acceptable only to the extent that he/she is stable, continuous, and *predictable*; this requirement must enter into a painful tension with the spontaneous unpredictability of inner impulses.

Secondly, it is important that the space changes within which the individual acts and pursues his/her goals. The more complicated the social apparatus becomes, the more instances are involved in each individual process. If the sensation of hunger is aimed at food and satiety, modernity interposes between hunger and food years of education, an employment contract, wage labor, and a supermarket; the path to sex leads through deodorant, a discotheque, a period of considerable waiting, countless phone calls, and possibly a flower shop. In both cases, a pleasurable shortening of the path virtually imposes itself.

In modernity, Elias says, *long chains of action* have taken the place of short ones. Long chains of action, however, mean *postponement*, that is, if satisfaction becomes foreseeable at all. Moreover, the transition from short to long chains means a process of abstraction in which certain qualities of experience fall by the wayside:

“Life becomes in a sense less dangerous, but also less emotional or pleasurable, at least as far as the direct release of pleasure is concerned.”¹⁹

“[T]he other forms of compulsion which now prevail in the pacified spaces pattern the individual’s conduct and affect impulses in the same direction. The denser the web of interdependence becomes into which the individual is enmeshed with the advancing division of functions, [...] the more strongly is each individual constrained from an early age to take account of the effects of his or her own or other people’s actions on a whole series of links in the social chain. The moderation of spontaneous emotions, the tempering of affects, the extension of mental space beyond the moment into the past and future,

¹⁷ “Part of the tensions and passions that were earlier directly released in the struggle of man and man, must now be worked out within the human being.” (Ibid., p. 375).

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 367f. (add. W./A.).

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 375.

the habit of connecting events in terms of chains of cause and effect – all these are different aspects of the same change of conduct”.²⁰

The emotion of civilized people is thus curbed. Elias confronts them – without much historical specificity – with chivalry and nobility:

*“The life of the warriors [...] is threatened continually and directly by acts of physical violence; thus, measured against life in more pacified zones, it oscillates between extremes. Compared with this other society, it permits the warrior extraordinary freedom in living out his feelings and passions, it allows savage joys, the uninhibited satisfaction of pleasure from women, or of hatred in destroying and tormenting anything hostile or belonging to an enemy.”*²¹

Historically disputable and certainly not unproblematic in its male-identified perspective, the passage is nevertheless illustrative. Long chains of action have a genuine potential for frustration. Short chains of action, one might conclude, stand in contrast to this; the direct, clear coupling of cause and effect, action and consequence, deed and impact takes on a utopian quality in contemporary society.

And the shortest conceivable chains of action, and here we come full circle, offer destruction and violence. If the neighbor is too loud – one gun shot from the balcony and there is silence, actually-factually, irrevocably and without delay, immediately. If something is in my way, I blow it away. These examples show that society has good reasons for blocking such solutions; but also that below the taboo the impulse is certainly still active.

Our thesis is that in the midst of modernity, computer games – realizing the utopia – once again open up the drama of short chains of action. Transferred into the sphere of symbolic trial action²², separated from actual consequences – this is the definition of games – they allow the subjects to establish themselves as effective, as capable of action. To us, this seems to be the privilege of the first-person shooter; cause – effect; bang and gone; the fact that there are still points awarded for this becomes nothing more than a sanctioning: no postponement, pleasurable short chains, taboo undermined, but still okay.

In this interpretation, and this is striking, violence would not be violence. It would be nothing but a *mode of representation*, a privileged opportunity to create short chains of action and to exploit the potential for pleasure that these offer in the midst of a frustrating world of long chains. The symbolic refraction, the playful character of the game, thus takes center stage.

Elias’ theory can be read as an indication that in modernity the model of agency itself is undergoing a profound crisis. If the long chains are confusing and frustrating, but at the same time subjects are forced to play the role of subject, bearer of agency at least as far as the hamster wheel of society requires, this split pervades the agent, who as agent is least able to tolerate the split.²³ *The need for compensation* arises in the wake of frustration. And more realistic than the fear that violence could spill over from the symbolic into the actual would be the fear that computer gamers are not satisfied with pure compensation or with *patches* in the long run.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 370.

²¹ Ibid., p. 370f. (emph. W./A.).

²² In German: “Probehandeln”; the term is taken from Freud, who speaks of thinking as “an experimental kind of acting” (F., Sigmund: Formulations on the two principles of mental functioning. In: The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud. London: Hogarth 1958, pp. 215-226, here: p. 221).

²³ “Humanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self – the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings – was created, and something of this process is repeated in every childhood. The effort to hold itself together attends the ego at all its stages”. (Horkheimer, Max; Adorno, Theodor W.: *Dialectic of Enlightenment. Philosophical Fragments* [1947]. Stanford, Cal.: Stanford UP 2002, p. 26).

Conclusion

The thesis can be summarized in three points: 1. When talking about interactivity, it is usually assumed that only the 'inter-' needs explanation; activity and action, on the other hand, are assumed to be part of everyday experience. This apparent certainty, however, does not stand up to scrutiny from a cultural studies perspective. If agency/activity is at the center of bourgeois self-understanding, it becomes clear that this is not a general anthropological question, but a historical one with a precise time horizon. The focus shifts to the concept of the *subject*, which may be a given in grammar, but which in the actuality of everyday life – like a Tamagotchi – needs daily care, stabilization, and reinforcement.

2. Cultural theory tells us, secondly, that the subject is in a profound crisis. And this not on the lofty heights of subject-critical philosophy, but likewise in everyday experience, where neo-liberalism preaches that each individual has his fate in his own hands, but where traffic rules and SSN, awkward EU-regulations on the import of caramel sweets, employer and landlord clearly deny this. The action model of the computer game enters into this contradiction as a *patch*.

3. In this respect, the *pleasure* that the game provides is a *re-enactment*. A late reverberation of that male model of action, which – *mass culture is a woman*²⁴ – is so inadequate to the present that Elias transports it to a mythical time of "the warrior". In the computer game, we are allowed to swing the mace once again. There, the chains of action are shortened in a pleasurable way. Cause – effect. Bang and gone. Outside the game, long chains and mediation reign.

It is this mediation that implodes in the computer game. The fact that media – in general – are the *epitome of mediation* accounts for the special tension of this media constellation.

²⁴ Huyssen, Andreas: Mass Culture as Woman. Modernism's Other. In: H., A.: After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana UP 1986, pp. 44-62.