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# Special Issue Introduction: Politicizing agency in digital play after humanism

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## Abstract

Although digital games offer pleasures of causal clarity – and moral order – much remains unresolved in their texts, paratexts, and practices. The worldly coherence and agential harmony of digital games are not innocent. They cultivate modes of subjectivity in game culture that vindicate masculinist, colonial, and extractivist ways of being in the world. At the same time, games are used by developers, players, and streamers to wrestle with the limits and complicities of human agency, where stories find no closure and things do not add up. This special issue begins at these rough edges and loose ends to examine the ruptures and residues of agency as a liberal humanist ideology that is crystallized and critiqued by digital play and game making. Drawing from critical posthumanism's problematization of agency, the articles collected here explore digital play's mediation of heroism and authoritarianism, contagion and ableism, automatism and creativity. These critical explorations signal a shift in conceptualizations of agency away from agency as a quality afforded in the closed circuit of game and player by building on understandings of play as assemblages co-constituted by players, platforms, and institutions. Instead of agentic qualities, these articles collectively emphasize the plurality of 'agentic modalities' that are unevenly interwoven from player interpretations, platform infrastructures, game designs, and developer software tools. This issue's focus on agency's modalities instead of substance contributes to the ongoing shift in games research away from the analysis of structural properties of game systems. Instead, this special issue presents contextualized case studies that foreground performances of livability through modalities at and beyond the margins of the agentic frame. Our contribution to these debates lies in this special issue's collective critique of this agentic frame and its liberal humanism by grounding posthuman theorizations vis-à-vis positionalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability.

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Our current condition is composited by planetary-scale computational systems networked by unaccountable causalities and compounded contingencies. Exceeding the cognizance and capacities of the human, this condition beckons us to take stock of 'agency' as a way to make sense of assemblages of humans, technologies, and ecosystems. The interpretive work of the humanities has conventionally been premised on human subjectivity and human quests for meaning through the concept of agency. In this context, agency is understood as the socially constituted capacity to act and is associated with liberal humanist ideologies linking freedom, free will, and creativity to personhood. Developed within this frame, many digital games allegorize agency through their technics of play and aesthetics of coherence. Nguyen (2020) contends that games are artefacts designed to clarify rules, aptitudes, and values of agents in ways that harmonize a player's actions, capacities, and solutions. Accordingly, games have been analyzed as exemplary agential art forms that provide an 'existential balm' (Nguyen, 2020: 21) for human experiences that are mired in circumstantial ambiguity. Such theorizations of agency resonate with medium exceptionalism in the study of games compared to other screen-based media. This medium exceptionalism has been a feature of the field, positing the interactivity of digital games as affording the satisfaction of taking meaningful actions that are actualized as diegetic consequences (Murray, 1997; Ndalianis, 1999).

Although digital games offer pleasures of causal clarity – and moral order – much remains unresolved in their texts, paratexts, and practices. The worldly coherence and agential harmony of digital games are not innocent. They cultivate modes of subjectivity in game culture that vindicate masculinist, colonial, and extractivist ways of being in the world. At the same time, games are used by developers, players, and streamers to wrestle with the limits and complicities of human agency, where stories find no closure and things do not add up. This special issue begins at these rough edges and loose ends to examine the ruptures and residues of agency as a liberal humanist ideology that is crystallized *and* critiqued by digital play and game making. Drawing from critical posthumanism's problematization of agency, the articles collected here explore digital play's mediation of heroism and authoritarianism, contagion and ableism, automatism and creativity. These critical explorations signal a shift away from agency as a quality afforded in the closed circuit of game and player (Keogh, 2018) by building on understandings of play as assemblages co-constituted by players, platforms, and institutions (Taylor, 2009). Instead of agentic qualities, these articles collectively emphasize the plurality of 'agentic modalities' (Jennings, 2019) that are unevenly interwoven from player interpretations, platform infrastructures, game designs, and developer software tools.

This issue politicizes agency in the ways videogames are consumed, circulated, and produced: articles by Stephanie Jennings, by Rob Gallagher, and by Paolo Ruffino analyze how players make sense of the limits of their control over videogame worlds, bodies, narratives, and through paratexts. Analyzing *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017), *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018), and *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016) respectively, Jennings, Ruffino, and Gallagher examine the constitution of agentic modalities through the masculinized toxicity and racialized ableism of videogame texts and culture. This critical focus on marginality continues in articles by Brendan Keogh and Aleena Chia, which engage with agentic modalities in the socio-otechnical conditions of game making software tools. Analyzing game engines and procedural content generation techniques, respectively, Keogh and Chia pivot the problematization of freedom

and constraint away from game studies' focus on the circuit of player and system. Instead, these articles politicize how computational tools interoperate with game industry labor practices to frame autonomy and automatism at the intersections of race, class, and gender. Last but not least, the articles by Bo Ruberg, and by Mark R. Johnson and Nathan J. Jackson, explore case studies of videogames played by nonhuman agents and streamed on Twitch. Their analysis of nonhuman game-play (by Johnson and Jackson) and the automated deer of Brent Watanabe's *San Andreas Deer Cam* (by Ruberg) reveal complex agential frameworks capable of generating new forms of affect. The player/viewer is apparently marginalized in these interventions but is still present in the agential assemblage connecting human and nonhuman players.

Game studies has engaged with the politics of agency – this body of research will be outlined in this introduction to the special issue. This issue's focus on agency's modalities instead of substance contributes to the ongoing shift in games research away from the analysis of structural properties of game systems. Going beyond studies that signal the exigency of conceptual shifts towards agency as relational and improvisational (see for example Wardrip-Fruin et al., 2009), the contributors to this issue begin with the understanding that '[a]ssemblages are performances of livability' (Tsing, 2015: 157–8). Assemblage-based approaches underscore how agencies emerge from collaborative modes of survival that exceed the analysis of single agents or relationships. Agency is not a feature of rule-based systems such as games or a quality enacted by unmarked agents such as players. Instead, this special issue presents contextualized case studies that foreground performances of livability through modalities at and beyond the margins of the agentic frame. Our contribution to these debates lies in this special issue's collective critique of this agentic frame and its liberal humanism by grounding posthuman theorizations in positionalities of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability.

## Agentic Modalities and Competencies

Since its inception, digital game studies has problematized the relation between human operator and machine. Games research has long been concerned with the politics and aesthetics of interactivity and its delimitation of player agency in relation to other screen-based media. Drawing from media and cultural studies, the humanistic study of games adopted normative frameworks that divided audiences into active and passive, and media into new and old, in order to evaluate players' power over and participation within architected environments. Today, discussions about agency in games has diversified from the analysis of interactive forms (Laurel, 1991; Manovich, 1996) to consider participation and co-creation in game production (Banks, 2013; Joseph, 2018) diversity and inclusion in game representations and communities (Gray and Leonard, 2018; Ruberg and Shaw, 2017; Stang, 2019), and affordances of bodies, devices, and platforms (Brock and Fraser, 2018; Keogh, 2018; Nieborg and Poell, 2018) that make up assemblages of play (Apperley and Jayemanne, 2012; De Paoli and Kerr, 2010; Taylor, 2009; Leorke and Wood, 2019).

Agency is at an inflection point in the cognate fields of critical theory and media studies. Marxist feminists have proposed ecological frameworks for reconceptualizing capitalism through complex interdependencies and multispecies commons instead of the agency of individuals or institutions (Roelvink and Gibson-Graham, 2009; Tsing, 2015). Posthumanists have critiqued Western humanist ideals of reason and autonomy as masculinist, ethnocentric, and anthropocentric (Braidotti, 2016) and proposed cognitive assemblages to understand linguistic and volitional acts as emergent from nonconscious biological and algorithmic processes and environments (Hayles, 2017). According to this scholarship, once we shift the primary unit of analysis from the properties of objects and boundaries of bodies to intra-acting phenomena, it becomes clear that 'agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world' (Barad, 2007: 141).

When we published the original call for papers, we referred to an imminent issue of *GAME The Italian Journal of Game Studies,* on the same topic. The issue was published in 2019–2020 and contains fundamental contributions evincing a more attentive reading of the literature on agency. The *GAME* issue also signals an interest towards scholarship that does not speak directly to the game studies community, for instance, looking at theorizations of agential-materialism and intra-actions (McKeown, 2019), affect and phenomenology (Williams, 2019). Stephanie Jennings' (2019) meta-synthesis of agency in this *GAME* issue provides a much-needed review of decades of academic debates on the study of games and interactive media. This established a necessary reference and turning point in the field, which our current issue further develops through several analytical case studies.

The articles address the narrative that sees agency as interrelated to the individual's competence and ability to intervene in the virtual environment. In our current special issue, the articles by Jennings (2022), Ruffino (2022) and Gallagher (2022) in particular address case studies where the individual's competence to navigate the simulation is challenged and decentred by the narrative. In game studies, 'agency [is] used synonymously—at times interchangeably—with a number of other words, including but not limited to: freedom, choice, control, autonomy, and action' (Jennings, 2019: 89). Agency was introduced as a concept in game studies to make sense of the desire to control and have a visible effect on the interactive narratives and immersive environments of the videogame. For example, as a key figure in the establishment of the field, Espen Aarseth (1997) noticed how cybertexts and ergodic literature put the player or reader at risk of rejection and, differently from other forms of narrative, require the acquisition of skills, expertise, and dexterity to proceed through the story. Agency, intended as the competence to understand, approach and pass through the challenges of the ludic simulation, necessarily involves the possibility of failure. Game studies has long neglected the implications of failure in game-play, looking at the ideal subject of play as a normative figure capable of controlling the interface and navigate the content of the simulated environment (Giddings and Kennedy, 2008; Juul, 2013).

From such a perspective, the notion of agency in videogame culture also served to hide the barriers preventing racialized and minoritized players from engaging with videogames and interactive texts, as they are excluded from the 'technicity' and specialized discourse surrounding digital play (Kennedy and Dovey, 2006), and the varied ways in which identities affect the experience of play (Gray, 2020). Agency, in its original formulation, summarised and simplified the complex process of acquisition of the codes and techniques required to manipulate ludic interfaces, for example, in videogames. It also reinforced the image of an ideal subject of play as able-bodied (Carr, 2016), and embedded within a social environment where the time spent acquiring the necessary skills to manipulate the interfaces is considered acceptable. Videogames have been imagined as an expression of desires to take control and act freely in virtual environments, thus normalizing those desires. Such an understanding of agency, historically promoted in the marketing material of new videogame products, prepared the ground for narratives of meritocracy, which in turn contributed to the 'toxicity' of videogame culture associated with the misogyny of the GamerGate online harassment campaign (Paul, 2018).

## Agentic Freedom and Constraints of Game Making

Research on agency in game studies has focused on the '*circuit* of player-and-videogame' that foregrounds the inextricability of actors within any given network (Keogh, 2018: 40, original emphasis). Keogh's (2022: 375) article in the present special issue goes beyond this formulation to include game makers, computational tools such as game engines, and their emergence 'from

complex production cultures and embodied engagements with software tools.' Similarly, Chia's (2022) article in this issue expands the conceptual foci of agency from players and their interpretive and co-creative practices to development techniques and cultures. Both these articles explore the agentic modalities of videogame production and its sociotechnical stratifications across race, class, and gender. In particular, these articles take up game studies' central problematic of agentic meaning-making as negotiations between freedom and constraint.

Key works in the study of games have highlighted foundational tensions between the open-endedness of play and the structure of game rules (Pearce, 2009; Henricks, 2020; see Masek and Stenros, 2021). Indeed, what makes games meaningful in the contexts of modern leisure are not absolute but relative freedoms within rule-bound environments (Nguyen, 2020). This tension animates what Thomas Malaby (2009) calls 'contrived contingency' in games: a mixture of constraint and open-endedness that calibrates multiple contingencies to produce outcomes that are meaningful because they are patterned but not entirely foreclosed. Like Malaby's study of *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003), other studies of virtual worlds also use the concept of affordances to politicize how technological systems are designed and experienced as simultaneously prescriptive and enabling for different cross-sections of players (Nardi, 2010). Understanding games as architected environments underscores how complex and compounded mechanics in computational interfaces and infrastructures circumscribe player choices as a condition of their affordance. These studies of how the design of virtual worlds differentially impact privileged and marginalized players draws more generally on the politicization of the materiality of technological artifacts and systems within their social contexts (Winner, 1986). Like engineers of material and technical artifacts, developers of virtual worlds often legitimize their designs through claims of the neutrality of technology as a tool for users and players to exercise greater degrees of freedom. Malaby (2009: 14) maintains, however, 'that apparent freedom belies a significant innovation in techniques of governance.'

Virtual world tools in *Second Life* govern their users through the architecting of choice according to neoliberal ideologies that see emergent creations as legitimate regardless of their social or aesthetic qualities (Malaby, 2009). Game making tools such as the Unity game engine govern through what Benjamin Nicoll and Brendan Keogh (2019) call a 'democratization dispositif,' which interpellates users through interface design and promotional rhetoric into ideas of empowerment. Governing through assurances of a levelled playing field and a blank slate for users' creative visions, Unity enrolls users into neoliberal modes of work and identity formation (Nicoll and Keogh, 2019). For this special issue, Keogh (2022) reports that rather than a blank slate for infinite choices, videogame makers' sense of control stemmed from the constraints of software tools and their social expectations. Stefan Werning (2021) contextualizes that game making software are not neutral tools but cognitive filters that shape users' understandings of the material being processed and the problem at hand. For example, game tools with visual programming interfaces claim to empower artists and designers with varying levels of technical expertise. However, the simplicity of these interfaces belies the complexity of their underlying code, which are shaped into scripts and shortcuts by engineers to steer game makers into patterns of desired use (Whitson, 2018). This disciplinary stratification between artists and engineers is the focus of Chia's (2022) analysis of procedural content generation in this special issue. This article argues that understanding agentic modalities in game production requires accounting for the autonomy of game tools as computational systems with complex dependencies. It also requires critiquing uneven power relations between tool makers and tool users as they crisscross transnational game production pipelines.

## Digital Play at the Limits of the Agentic Frame

The articles collected in this special issue move beyond a critique of the centrality of the human figure in the narratives surrounding interactivity. The study of digital games and virtual environments has insisted on problematizing the dualism separating operator and machine, and the image that sees human operators as acting or interacting through the available options and narrative branches of the simulation. Interactivity assumes the user to take a central position and the virtual environment to be tied to the human operator – a vision that appears too limited in light of theories of posthumanism and agential realism. Janet Murray (1997), Lev Manovich (2001) and Aarseth (1997) attempted their redefinition of agency-as-interaction by evoking the participational effort required to traverse the 'ergodic' text. Informed by posthumanism and by critical approaches to the ideologies of algorithmic cultures, Alexander Galloway (2006) and Brendan Keogh (2018) articulated how actions in videogames result from the 'coming-together' of human and nonhuman agents. From such a position, it becomes possible to discuss agency not as an abstract value of digital play but as a situated experience involving the body and desires of the human operator in a complex and sometimes contradictory manner. Theories of affect (Anable, 2018), social science and psychology (Brock, 2016) can shed light on the varied and occasionally self-destructive pleasures that originate from the encounter of human and nonhuman agents in digital play. A critique of agency in digital play can also enable a more complex understanding of the imbalances of power that circle across the cybernetic nexus connecting players and machines.

In recent years, game studies have re-evaluated the agentic frame that separates the operator and the machine. In particular, the role of the nonhuman has been reconsidered as more than a mere respondent, challenger or co-operator, but as potentially taking the lead in framing the embodied experience of the human player. The attention towards the nonhuman has been possible also through a number of recent experiments in game design that have been circulating from the media art environment to the mainstream market. Galloway (2006) noticed how the videogame *Shenmue* (SEGA, 1999) would keep playing itself through an 'ambience act', when the human operator decided not to intervene. The non-player characters populating the fictional representation of Yokosuka, Japan, would continue roaming around the city and attending to their duties independently of the human player/viewer. *Shenmue* represents an early example of an open-world adventure game, a genre of ludic experiences that we are now fully accustomed to seeing on contemporary consoles and PCs.

Contemporary game design has been experimenting with the possibilities offered by the delegation of agency to the nonhuman, shedding light on a broader range of possible forms of engagement with digital play. Sonia Fizek argues that the pleasure of playing often derives from interpassivity rather than interactivity: the pleasure of engaging with a text that provides the means of its own reception (Fizek, 2018). Incremental and idle games (such as the popular *Cookie Clicker* and *AdVenture Capitalist*), that require minimal player interaction and keep playing themselves in the absence of an active human agent are now popular on smartphones and as a form of casual gaming (Ruffino, 2019). Even if videogames are played through assemblages of humans and nonhumans, the two sides are not always equally involved. We are now seeing numerous experiments with game design that brings to the fore the aesthetic possibilities of nonhuman play.

## Article Summaries

The politicization of competence, skill and adroitness is approached in this special issue from a variety of angles. Stephanie Jennings in 'Only you can save the world (of videogames):

Authoritarian Agencies in the Heroism of Videogame Design, Play, and Culture' explores how videogames celebrated for their inclusive representation might reinforce the individualism of player's agency in the simulated environment, and their position of power and control. The videogame *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) puts at the centre of the storyline a heroine – a pivotal character in the branding of Sony Computer Entertainment's digital offer for the current generation of consoles. As the author argues, the strategy for gender inclusivity implies that new audiences will adapt to pre-existing normativity and still be required to acquire and improve 'skills', gain paratextual knowledge and sufficient monetary and time resources to 'master' the game.

Paolo Ruffino's article ('There is No Cure: Paratexts as Remediations of Agency in *Red Dead Redemption 2'*) looks at the videogame Red Dead Redemption 2 (RDR2), released by Rockstar Games in 2018 (Rockstar Games, 2018), to explore the normative able-bodiedness of games culture. The article draws parallels with the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the strategies of prevention that circulated on news media in 2020. RDR2 tells the story of Arthur Morgan, an outlaw in 1899 United States who aspires to become independent of his criminal companions. The dream never materializes and is ultimately made impossible by a respiratory infection: the character contracts tuberculosis, an incurable disease at that time. The article explores a number of YouTube videos produced by players of RDR2 that elaborate imaginary strategies to save the character. The auto-ethnographical analysis focuses on the performative potential of these paratextual practices. Ruffino argues that the videos restore and *remediate* the players' lost agency in the narrative and the environment of the videogame. The videos imagine how to navigate the narrative of the game in search of the invisible infection and elaborate strategies to keep the potentially infective non-player characters at a distance. In doing so, they re-imagine how to restore a disembodied subject of storytelling and the possibility of navigating an environment tied to the user's experience in a videogame that has explicitly denied both privileges. The COVID-19 pandemic overlaps with the auto-ethnographic analysis. The author concludes by discussing the normativity of the strategies of prevention circulated during the pandemic and how their affective potential to assuage our sense of fragility comes at the cost of excluding those who have no agency towards the storyline of their lives and their relations with the surrounding environments.

Rob Gallagher's article ('Humanising gaming? The politics of posthuman agency in autobiographical videogames') looks at the trend of producing autobiographical videogames. Games such as *That Dragon, Cancer* (Numinous Games, 2016), analyzed as the main case study in the article, belong to a new genre of ludic experiences that brings to the fore the biographical narrative of the game designers. The game talks about the story of the authors' child, who passed away at an early age after being born with a developmental disorder. Gallagher argues that biographical videogames constitute a new form of life-writing that engages with questions around agency and self-representation. Expanding an established literary genre, ludobiographies involve the player in a novel experience that merges gaming with life-writing and has the potential to shed light on the meanings and boundaries of being human. The game tells a life story, but it is a story about death. It is a narrative of a child who never acquired the capability of narrating his own life. The game gives players margins of movement but is also restricting those options as it reflects backwards on a series of events that have already unfolded. In doing so, *That Dragon, Cancer* interrogates the potential of the interactive narrative form to question issues of interdependency, precarity, and disability.

Brendan Keogh's article ('Situating the videogame maker's agency through craft') similarly investigates the limits of the notion of agency in relation to the development practices of videogames (Keogh, 2022). Keogh looks at game makers' competence and skills through the notion of 'craft'. Craft enables an analysis of agency as a bodily experience and through its encounter 'with the affordances and constraints of material tools and media, and the collectively agreed upon and

legitimised conventions of a field' (2022, 3). Keogh draws on more than 200 interviews with game makers (conducted between 2018-2020 in Australia, North America, Europe, and Southeast Asia) and observes how the participants refer to the craft of game development. The concept is brought up in their interviews to refer to the rather nebulous problem of identifying the practice of making games through a distributed agency involving human and nonhuman agents.

Aleena Chia's article ('The artist and the automaton in digital game production') explores the automation of content creation in videogames through the use of tools for procedural generation. The widespread use of procedural content generation (PCG) in small and large scale productions is analyzed through a selection of talks given at the Games Developers Conference between 2015 and 2020. Chia observes how developers justify the introduction of PCG as a technology that saves time for creative labor by automatizing repetitive tasks. However, PCG also introduces a 'racialized stratification' that separates those whose work is considered to be worth automating, and those who qualify as undertaking creative labor. Workers' competencies in the videogame industry thus become the subject of a technical and economic discourse that separates the skilled from the 'unskilled'. The unskilled are made to disappear with the introduction of PCG, and relegated to often outsourced and precarious positions further down the line of production.

In this issue, the articles by Bo Ruberg and by Mark R. Johnson and Nathan J. Jackson move even further by exploring examples of games where the human player is almost entirely absent and marginalized. Ruberg's contribution ('After Agency: The queer posthumanism of video games that cannot be played') reads the online performance *San Andreas Deer Cam*, a piece by the media artist Brent Watanabe (Ruberg, 2022). The artist replaces the human (male) character of the videogame Grand Theft Auto V (GTAV) (Rockstar North, 2013) with a deer and then automatizes the movements of the animal in Los Santos, a virtual reproduction of Los Angeles. The deer has been left wandering through the virtual city while streaming its movements on Twitch. Ruberg looks at Watanabe's intervention as suggesting a 'queer posthumanist' reading of GTAV. While post-humanism is at risk of marginalizing racial and gendered struggles by making the situatedness of the body less relevant, a 'queer' posthumanism can evaluate non-normative experiences that de-territorialize the body (and its pleasures) across the screen. Brent Watanabe's deer is weirdly sexual, Ruberg argues. It is an 'it', rather than a 'he' – as the main characters of GTAV are all invariably male. It is naked in front of our eyes and of those of the non-player characters of Los Santos. The deer is approached, harassed and bullied by the non-player characters of Los Santos as if it was a human character capable of self-determination. It embodies the experience of a non-normative, not-fitting subject, incapable of taking full control of their body and actions. Yet, the deer can bring about new affective relationships with the screen. It can be annoying, it can make us laugh, and it can make the NPCs angry. The deer is moved by an automatized system generating commands. It is not supposed to be there, it does not obey our desires, and demands an unusually long attention. Brent Watanabe's performance brings in front of our eyes the ultimately unknowable condition of nonhuman agency.

The article by Mark R. Johnson and Nathan J. Jackson ('Twitch, Fish, Pokémon and Plumbers: Game live streaming by nonhuman actors') looks at nonhuman agencies in streaming cultures (Johnson and Jackson, 2022). In particular, the authors focus on four interventions involving the streaming of automated play sessions on Twitch: two streaming channels showing an automated 'trading' system of Pokémon, the fictional creatures by Nintendo; a modified stage made with Super Mario Maker that runs by itself in a 4-second loop, where Mario dies in each reiteration unless a 'one in a 7.5 million' event takes place; and the streaming of a Pokémon game played through the involuntary inputs of a fish in a tank, monitored by a webcam with motion-capture software. In each experiment, the human agent is no longer playing the game. Either the game plays itself or is played

by a nonhuman agent whose movements are translated into a numerical sequence of instructions. Johnson and Jackson observe that, while the human is marginalized in these case studies, it is still playing a fundamental role. Humans are spectating, chatting, commenting, and giving value to the automated performances. The events are still largely produced and circulated through the rules of the quantified attention economy of streaming platforms such as Twitch. The algorithms that determine the performances are also acting upon, and playing with, the human viewers. Ultimately, these radical experiments with nonhuman play can make us reconsider the practice of streaming videogames as redistributions of agency rather than through the dualism of passive and active viewership.

On a final note, we would like to share a brief background story to this editorial project. The work supporting this special issue Politicizing Agency in Digital Play after Humanism started in 2019. At that time, we, the curators, discussed and presented a proposal for a workshop at the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference to be held the following year in Tampere, Finland. The conference was later cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing, we are expecting to curate the workshop planned for 2019 at the DiGRA 2022 conference. The publication of this special issue comes at the culmination of a particular historical time, where we have all experienced a renewed sense of precarity. Speaking of agency, in our real and digital lives, takes a different meaning than in 2019. We believe the contributions to this issue, while being concerned with the production and consumption of leisure products, provide a broad range of perspectives to articulate our contemporary feelings of fragility. For these reasons, we hope that the current issue can provide a useful resource for scholars in various fields, extending beyond the study of digital games.

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