Thinking the Things We Play With

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The Strong, USA's National Museum of Play, is responsible for the 'National Toy Hall of Fame', an initiative that highlights, documents, and preserves what the museum curators consider to be the most important toys. The list of inductees is extensive, and it includes dolls like Barbie, board games like *Candy Land* (Abbott 1948), and even the venerable Atari 2600. It is a surprising collection that combines the analog and the digital, games and toys, and commercial items with more surprising selections. For example, among the inductees we have the ball, the cardboard box, and the stick.

Intuitively, these decisions make sense. A cardboard box is an excellent toy, a vessel for the imagination that, as the text on the Hall of Fame's website states, transports players 'to a world of his or her own, one where anything is possible' (The Strong 2005: n.p.). The cardboard box is also an excellent example of a cross-species toy, as anybody with a cat knows. The ball is another excellent example of a toy we can all agree upon, and another case of a phenomenal plaything for interspecies play.

But the National Toy Hall of Fame inductee that fascinates me the most is the stick. First inducted in 2008, the stick is acknowledged on the website as perhaps being 'the world's oldest toy' (The Strong 2008: n.p.), capable of mediating pretend play, exploration play, free play, interspecies and animal play, and even artistic expressions. The stick is also an excellent object to think the things we play with.

In this chapter I will use the stick as a starting point to inquire into the relation between materiality and play. More specifically, I want to reflect on the processes that take place when a stick becomes a toy, and what these processes tell us about the activity of

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play. The study of toys and their position in culture and society is an old topic of play and game studies (Giddings 2016; Heljakka 2016; Sutton-Smith 1986). In this chapter I want to ride the wave of materialist game studies (Apperley and Jayemane, Darshana, 2012) to provide a new materialist reading of the activity of play. This reading wants to draw game studies closer to the tradition of materialist media theory (Coole and Frost 2010; Parikka 2012).

Drawing on Karen Barad's philosophy (Barad 2003, 2007), and following its applications in game studies (Fizek 2018; McKeown 2018), this chapter will sketch an understanding of material play as a relational engagement with objects and things (Ingold 2012), an entanglement of agencies and materialities that leads to the re-configuration of the nature of objects and the world. Ingold's distinction between objects, which are 'completed forms that stand over and against the perceiver and block further movement (Ingold 2012: 439); and 'things', which are 'gatherings of materials in movement' (Ingold 2012: 439), allows addressing materiality as a dynamic process that is the result of an engagement with *things*. To understand the ontology of that engagement, Barad's ontoepistemology is an essential perspective. In Barad's work, things come into being, things begin mattering when agential cuts stabilize 'phenomena into doings' (Barad 2007: 139-142). In other words, the ontology of things, in Ingold's sense, comes to being when there is an agential engagement with them, when things start *mattering*.

Relationality is one of the key concepts in a general epistemological trend that continues the displacement of anthropocentric thinking. Relational thinking situates ontology not on things, or in the human, but in the relations between agents and the material world. This is an essential displacement of anthropological thinking because it de-centers the way knowledge is constructed. From ethics (Coeckelbergh 2021; Lee 2004) to

aesthetics (Bishop 2004), relationality implies inquiring not on what things are, but what relations they establish and the nature of these relations are openings towards inclusive, ecocritical thinking. By de-centering ontology and situating as part of a network of relations that are not always anthropocentric, or in which humans do not always have a central hierarchical position, ecocritical thinkers are formulating novel ways of engaging with the problems of the Anthropocene, as they come up too with new potential ways of addressing these problems that do not take exclusively (western, male) human being's for granted (Bennett 2010; Tsing 2015). The material turn in game studies should also be interpreted as a relational turn. Rather than focusing on the nature or content of games, materialist game studies situates play in the relation between agents who play, human and non-human, and the things and objects around them.

With this chapter I want to first highlight how this relational understanding of play is part of the history of play, as seen through the objects we play with. And second, I want to sketch the possible avenues of research that relational material game studies can conduct, with a focus on the ethics and politics of play, more specifically as they relate to current ecocritical thinking around games (Backe 2017; Chang 2019).

When a stick becomes a toy

When I think about playing with a stick, my immediate response is embodied. My hands feel the weight of the stick, its length, whether it is coarse with bark or smooth after having been washed ashore. There are good sticks for playing, and bad sticks for playing. If I want to use it to hit things, the stick needs to provide a certain resistance, or it has to be rotten enough that it will surrender to my will for chaos and shatter in thousands of pieces. If I

want to use it to build something, it has to be sturdy for support, or flexible for bending at the right places. A stick can keep others away, but it can also pull us together.

All of these material characteristics of the stick are present in the object, whether that which we find in the floor of the woods or the one we rescue from the ocean or river waters. But the stick is not a toy until we play with it. Before that, it is something in the world, an object towards which we do not relate. Sticks become toys when we engage with them, when we relate to them.

My embodied response to the stick as toy is part of the activity of play. As phenomenologists of games have already identified (Keogh 2018; Sudnow 1983), our relation with games and other play technologies starts with the body. The research on game feel (Pichlmair and Johansen 2021) is a design-driven inquiry on how to make things *feel*, that is, be experienced as, games or other forms of playable media.

Feel is a point of entry to understand relational play and materiality. Philosophers of materiality and experience have inquired on the role of the material things that mediate our experience of the world (Heidegger 1971; Ihde 1990; Verbeek 2006). Within this tradition, play could be understood as a relational strategy (Rosenberger 2014) that stabilizes the mediation of things, and what effects it has in the world-as-experienced. That is, phenomenology would look at the stick-as-toy as part of the extended experiential gestalt. When playing, the stick would become a toy so that it can extend our capacity to play in specific ways.

However, classic phenomenology as well as post-phenomenology can be said to continue an anthropocentric tradition in Western thinking. The things that mediate the experience of the world are perceived as tools, instruments, or extensions of human agency, but not necessarily as agents themselves. The world can be understood to be inert unless

humans, and more specifically men, engage with it. But sometimes it is things that want to play, that display agency and that force us, humans, to renegotiate what we can and cannot do. Being in the world is not imposing human agency to things but negotiating – relating human agency to the world.

We need then a different approach to understand what happens when a stick becomes a toy. The argument that objects have agency is not new (Harman 2018; Latour 1992, 2008; Winner 1986), and it fact it is shaping not only humanistic theory but also the fields of design and human-computer interaction (Frauenberger 2019). New materialism allows for observing the processes of entanglement between agencies while taking into consideration their materiality. The new materialist argument I propose is simple: a stick is an object that becomes a toy when it entangles with agency that comes into being by playing.

The concept of entanglement has been used in game studies to address the complexities of making sense of the interfaces, agencies, and communities that constitute videogame play (Taylor 2009). This understanding of entanglement has drawn from Science and Technology Studies (Latour 2008), as well as from the intersection between that field and philosophy (DeLanda 2019). However, my understanding of entanglement draws closer to Barad's new materialism: it is only in an entanglement of agencies and of matter that we can talk about ontology (the nature of *things*), and epistemology (how can we construct knowledge about those things). In other words, what we study when we study the materials of play is the ontology of an entanglement of materiality and agency.

There is nothing immanent in the ontological category of 'toy'. The nature of the things we play with is a consequence of a materially-based entanglement between the agency of the thing, and the activity of play, which itself creates forms of agency. I started

this section by thinking about the embodied experience of the stick, how the way it felt was important to reflect on what makes a piece of wood a toy.

The stick becomes a toy when I become a player, when my agency comes into being in the form of a player. When I act as a player, I look for ways of engaging with the world that are appropriative, expressive, and that are pleasurable in and of themselves (Sicart 2014). When playing, the materiality of the stick becomes significant for my agency as player: the weight of the wood, its texture, its strength. The materiality of the stick is part of what facilitates my entanglement with it. And when I become entangled with the stick by playing, its agency is part of what I become related with: what it allows me to do, how it lets itself be appropriated and how it appropriates me. What I can do with a stick while playing is partially a result of the agency of the stick.

What happens to wood when it becomes a stick is part of a relational process that involves agency, material properties, and cultural settings. Being a toy is not as simple as it sounds; it is the result of a process of entanglement between the material and the biological, in a cultural and historical context. From a piece of wood, a new world comes into being.

Wood is a Stick is a Toy

Playing is creating new subjectivities, a new 'self' that becomes an agent in a ludic activity. Goffmanian understandings of play (Deterding 2009; Goffman 1961; Stenros 2015) understand this approach and provide a solid, empirical foundation of this phenomenon. Goffman described the self as a construction that took place in social contexts. In the case of games, for example, the rules and the materials of the game helped create the individual and collective selves of the players. When we play, we construct a particular self, and

perform that particular self too, because play is performance. However, understanding what happens to wood when it becomes a stick when it becomes a toy goes beyond understanding playing as a human activity.

Humans play, as do animals. But things play too: videogames are forms of software agency that are created to play (Boluk and LeMieux 2017; Kunzelman 2014). To understand material play we need to understand how things play. This leads inevitably to the question of agency.

In contemporary social sciences and humanities, it is commonplace to think that non-human objects have agency. What interests me is to specify that assumption: what happens to objects when we play with them? Material play is not just the activity of engaging with objects, it is a more complex process of negotiation of agencies and acknowledgement of materialities. The focus on materiality reveals the importance of play as a form of relating to objects, others, and the world.

To understand what it means to take a relational approach, we need to start by playing. And I will do so by embracing Maria Lugones' philosophy of playfulness. For Lugones, playing is a form of world-travelling that allows us to meet others, to identify 'with them […] because by travelling to their 'world' we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes' (1987: 17). Playing as world traveling is establishing a relation to others, in which we also understand and construct ourselves.

What makes playing a unique mode of relating to others is 'openness to surprise, […] to being a fool, […] to self-construction or reconstruction and to constriction or reconstruction of the 'worlds' we inhabit playfully' (Lugones 1987: 17). Playing is also characterized by 'uncertainty, lack of self-importance, absence of rules or as not taking rules as sacred, a not worrying about competence and a lack of abandonment to a particular

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construction of oneself, others and one's relation to them' (Lugones 1987: 17). While

Lugones' theory is broader than just focused on materiality, it provides a good starting point

to understand what happens to things when we play with them.

A piece of wood becomes something else when we approach it with the intention of

playing, of having fun, of wanting to use it for something that is silly, not self-important,

with rules that are created for the particular material characteristics of that piece of wood.

When picking up wood to play with it, we acknowledge in its material properties a particular

world and a particular agency – what I described as my physical experience of it.

When the piece of wood is picked up and it becomes a stick, we engage in a relational

process that is, following Barad's new materialist theory, a 'specific worldly configuration

[…] in the sense of materially engaging as part of the world in giving it specific material form'

(2007: 91). When a piece of wood becomes a stick, it is being 'mattered' (Barad 2007: 148),

that is, it becomes a particular reconfiguration of its materiality, in relation to my agency.

But also, my own agency as player, both materiality and experientially, is mattered by the

stick – what it allows me to do, what it forbids me from doing. In that double process of

mattering, a relation between to agencies comes to being, and a toy emerges.

This is pretty abstract philosophy, so let me try to explain the implications of it

through the stick and a game. Playing is a way of acting in the world, a particular form of

agency. Sometimes that agency takes place together with a material element, like a piece of

wood. The piece of wood has a series of material properties that allows it to do certain

things. That is a form of agency. Playing with a piece of wood is relating to its agency,

figuring out what we can do with it, and becoming related to it.

In *Metagaming* (2017), Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux write about speed

running as a form of metagaming, a way of playing with the type of software called

'videogame.' Speed running is also a good example of relational play as a way of creating an entanglement between human and non-human agencies by playing. The software called 'videogame' is designed to act in particular ways, sometimes on its own, sometimes as a response to players' actions. A speed runner is a player who has a playful relation to the rules of the original game. The purpose is to beat the game as fast as possible, sometimes with little respect for the way the game wants to be played Great speed runners change the way they play, their agency, to match as perfectly as possible the requirements that the software agency has to receive input. Sometimes, speed runners glitch or break parts of the software's agency to achieve even better times, often by engaging with a material understanding of how, for example, the physical memory of a computer works and how it allocates resources in it. Speed running is playing as world-travelling: adjusting who we are as players to who the software as agent is, in order to playfully explore boundaries.

Understanding play in the context of the human and the non-human requires a new materialist approach; a perspective that does not subordinate the material to the will of man, but that sees playing as a way of engaging and establishing relations with the things and the world around us, and letting those things and that world shape who we want to be. When wood becomes a stick and a stick becomes a toy, it is not just the material that becomes something else: we also change, our agency and our bodies transformed by the things we play with, in a mutual process of understanding and becoming.

The Worlds of Play

In *Vibrant Matter* (2010, Jane Bennett explores the political and ethical implications of new materialist theory. She defines her understanding of new materialism as 'vital materialism', as her interests are centered in the politics of mattering. If we are to consider that every

thing is an agent, how should we treat them? What are the politics of a world that needs to acknowledge for the power of the things in it? While this form of new materialist thinking is powerful and evocative, it sometimes requires to be specified, to describe in particular how a politics or an ethics of a world of *things* can take place.

Play can be accused of being similarly vague. In the Western world, the tradition of thinking about play that Schiller started and Huizinga continued sometimes sees the ludic activity as something mostly positive, that will make people free, that will allow for pleasure and the addressing of conflicts in orderly ways, in simplified manner. Play is supposed to help us learn, become better people, and entertain us. These possibilities are often realized through forms of learning that take the structure of games to reward certain behaviors or to communicate certain ideas. This idea of play as an instrument for change, while useful, might also be unambitious.

Thinking about the things we play with, thinking about the materiality of play, opens up for the possibility of novel forms of the politics and ethics of play. Lugones observes how 'the agonistic attitude' of Huizinga and Gadamer's theories of play is 'inimical to travelling across 'worlds'. The agonistic traveller is a conqueror, an imperialist' (1987: 15). Her idea of play as world travelling is an idea of moving towards others, understanding them while we also understand us. A new materialist understanding of world traveling implies that others can be non-human: they can be wood, electrons, plastic, cardboard, complex forms of agency embodied in different material possibilities.

From this perspective, our relation to the materials of the world through play is based on world travelling. We relate to the materials of the world as if they were agents in our play, inquiring what they can do, adapting to the way they let us act while we also change them so they can be better at playing with us. When the stick becomes a toy, we travel to its

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world, we relate to the potential it has to play together with us. It is a form of material acknowledgement, an understanding of the thing power it has and how we should relate to it. And that 'how' is by playing, but trying to understand it, by becoming entangled with it in the practice of the silly, fun, pleasurable experience of play.

Playing is a meeting of agencies that is rooted on materiality. Playing is related to the things in the world, how they can act, how they are constituted as agents. Focusing on material play grounds the possibilities that emerge in the activity of play – the worlds that are created, the experiences that take place. Playing is an acknowledgement of materiality, an entanglement with it, and a practice of relating to other agencies In *Play Anything* (2016), Ian Bogost proposes a materialist theory of play, drawing on Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) (Harman, 2018) to explain that playing is a way of approaching the things around us. Bogost's ideas are close to the ones I sketch in this chapter. However, a main point of divergence is that it's unclear whether Bogost's position of Object Oriented Ontology implies a separation between things and humans, a critique sometimes levied against OOO (Frauenberger 2019). Adopting Barad's new materialist perspective avoids this issue, since she explicitly claims that ontology is relational. In other words: there is no human-stick, but an agential combination of human and stick that comes to being when playing.

Why,then, is material play important? The non-human turn in social sciences and the humanities has revealed that a world full of things is also a world full of agents. This new ecology has de-centered the human, complicated the idea of 'man' (*sic*) as the center of 'creation' or 'knowledge', and forced us to understand that the current climate crisis, and the arrogance of the biased technologies we are developed, are in part a consequence of our incapacity as humans to meet and entangle with the material world in other terms that our imperialist, colonialist, and extractive ways.

Precisely here is where material play brings new possibilities to the table, especially if we embrace Lugones' ethos of loving world travelling as a form of play. Playing is becoming entangled with other material agents. Not make them instruments, but playmates, allowing them to change our agency so we can have fun, together. The stick lets us play with it, and it changes how we play. In doing so, we also select the right sticks to play. In that process of mutual acknowledgement, material play creates new worlds, new possibilities, new hybrid agencies.

Material play is then a way of letting us think about how we can better relate to the world around us, how we can better respect, enjoy, and inhabit its multiplicity while we also have fun doing it. Material play is then by definition ecocritical: an understanding that the things in the world are not there to serve us, but that are there with us, so we can together co-exist, or play. In his essay 'What is the point if we can't have fun?' David Graeber writes: 'The play principle can help explain why sex is fun, but it can also explain why cruelty is fun […] but it gives us ground to unthink the world around us' (2014: n.p.). Material play is a way of unthinking the world as a place serving human will. Material play is a way of understanding how wood can become a stick and can become a toy, and in doing so it changes from what is to what it could be. My understanding of material play is about those possibilities, about not being reduced to thinking that things are instruments for action or extraction, but to see the world as a place full of agents, all ready to play with us.

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