

“Gamic Realism”: Player, Perception and Action in Video Game Play

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a phenomenological approach to the video game medium, in order to argue that realism in video games is dependent on the player’s embodied experience of play as opposed to mimetic representation. My paper discusses the relation of the player, and specifically the player’s body, to the idea of realism in video games. Chris Crawford wrote in 1982 that “games represent a subset of reality”. Similarly, Jesper Juul argues in his recent book that games are “half real”. I discuss this idea of half-reality through a consideration of the terms virtual reality and telepresence. Media artist Eduardo Kac distinguishes between the two concepts thus: VR presents purely synthetic sense-data lacking physical reality, while telepresence presents sense-data that both claims to correspond to a remote physical reality, and also allows a remote user to perform a physical action and see the results. Where does such a distinction leave the video game medium? I draw upon the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in order to argue that the controller interface (keyboard, joypad etc.) in video game play create an experience different from the disinterested perception involved with experiencing non-interactive media. Through Merleau-Ponty’s notion that the body is our main medium for having a world, I argue that gamic realism is always body-subjective, and reliant not on depiction but on action.

Author Keywords

Realism, Phenomenology, Game play

In his introduction to video games and literary theory, Julian Kücklich argues that the aesthetics of computer games is necessarily “an aesthetics of control” [9]. This paper considers this statement in relation to the issue of realism in games. I draw upon phenomenological philosophy in order to argue that realism in games is tied up with embodied perceptive experience.

The notion of reality in relation to video game play is one that much writing on video games has grappled with. Early research on game play was mostly conducted within

the “effects” paradigm, which often stemmed from a fear that the make-believe of playing a game would lead to actions and attitudes transferring from the game world into “real life”. As for scholarship on games within the emerging field of game studies, two comparable ideas are representative: Chris Crawford’s quote that games represent a “subset of reality” [3], and Jesper Juul’s contention that games are “half-real” [7]. Crawford argues in his 1982 book *The Art of Computer Game Design* that “games are closed formal systems that create a subjective and deliberately simplified representation of emotional reality” [3], where “objective accuracy is only necessary to the extent required to support the player’s fantasy” [3]. Crawford thus considers the formal system of the game as the basis from which the player’s imagination is drawn. Juul, similarly, claims that games are half-real because we play by real rules while slaying a fictional dragon. The reality of the game, for Juul, comes from the event of winning or losing, whereas the setting of the game is fictional [7]. Both Crawford and Juul hence see the formal qualities of the game, its system and its rules, as that which infers reality on the game play.

An alternative approach would be to consider the player, or more precisely the player’s embodied perception, as where the experience of reality is ultimately located. As we have entered the “information age”, obtaining knowledge, experience and communication through the means of digital technology is increasingly becoming the norm. Especially in the developed world, people spend increasingly large amounts of their time and lives through various communication technologies, whether shopping for goods they have never touched or smelled, or maintaining friendships with people they have never met. With this has come a renewed focus on the long-standing philosophical debates with regards to our perception of reality. As Hubert Dreyfus has noted, just as philosophers are coming to see the Cartesian ontology as false and the epistemological problems this posed as based on a mistaken premise, new technology is reviving the original mind/body divide [4]. Uncritical reflections on cyberspace as a distinct space separate from the physical, i.e. “real” world can be found throughout the social spectrum. Theorists like Howard

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Rheingold [11] celebrate the virtual as a space where we can leave our old selves behind and form new identities, new communities and bonds, transcending all spatial boundaries in order to form a global civil society, whereas others, like Paul Virilio sees the speed with which new media technologies are operating as eventually leading to the collapse of time and space [13]. With regards to video games, this focus on cyberspace as a radically “other” realm has resulted in a situation in which games are frequently considered within the framework of either utopian or dystopian thinking. On the one hand, games may be seen as spaces where a player can be anything, do anything, and if not play God then at least play with the notion of self. On the other hand, games are regularly, especially in the mainstream media, considered a dangerous and soul-destroying activity that is teaching children to become killing machines. The shooter *Doom* was famously blamed for corrupting the minds of the Columbine killers, and in 2005 US senator Hillary Rodham Clinton became the latest high-profile person to publicly condemn video games for “...stealing the innocence of our children and...making the difficult job of being a parent even harder” [12].

Yet with this increasing focus on cybertheory and the notion of cyberspace as a transcendental “other” space has also come a renewed interest in existential phenomenology, including the philosophical legacies of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the philosopher who most thoroughly argued that our experience of the world we live in is located through our bodies. At first, this may seem incongruous, if after all, the final fantasy of cyberspace is one in which we will be able to leave our bodies behind. Here I propose that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the body-subject as an alternative to the Cartesian cogito provides a means for arguing that our experience of realism in video games is not tied to the perceptive process, understood as the passive reception of visual stimuli, but to the enactive process, to movement and bodily sensation.

Two contemporary terms, sometimes used interchangeably, can be used to illuminate this idea, namely telepresence and virtual reality. Media artist Eduardo Kac provides a useful distinction between the two terms [8]. He asserts that virtual reality presents purely synthetic sense-data lacking physical reality. Virtual reality is designed from scratch, an autonomous world, or a closed formal system, similar to what Crawford notes in relation to video games. The CAVE (Cave Automatic Virtual Environment) virtual reality experience may illustrate this. A CAVE is a visually immersive environment in which projectors are directing images to the walls of a cube-shaped room. A user will wear special glasses in order to experience objects floating in the air, and to be able to walk around a 3D visual environment. Telepresence, on the other hand, according to Kac presents sense-data that both claims to correspond to a remote physical reality and also allows the distant user to perform a physical action and see the results. A well known example of art experimenting with the notion of

telepresence is the “Telegarden” installation, an art project that ran between 1995-2004, which has become known as one of the pioneering pieces of the net.art genre. The Telegarden was a small circular garden located developed at the University of Southern California under Ken Goldberg and Joseph Santarromana. It went online in 1995 and was moved to the Ars Electronica Centre in Austria in 1996. The Telegarden was linked to the World Wide Web, and through a small camera and a robotic arm, anyone willing to sign up could plant seeds and water the garden. The user could thus experience being a telepresent gardener.

If we use Kac’s distinctions, we can argue that virtual reality is an immersive experience of sense-data, an experience of an environment or a world lacking correspondence to a reality outside itself. Telepresence, on the other hand, allows for remote access to physical reality. In a telepresent state the user has control over her environment, and the ability to affect it.

To return to the question of the video game experience, it is possible to argue that video games conflate these terms. On the one hand games are autonomous, closed systems, designed worlds that do not refer to a reality outside of themselves. Whether we choose to describe games as mere concepts like *Tetris*, simulations like *the Sims*, plots like *Grand Theft Auto*, or narratives like *the Legend of Zelda*, games present imaginary scenarios without any analogue correspondence to remote physical reality. They may attempt at visual verisimilitude to the physical world, but the images they present are constructed. Yet games allow for a player to perform physical actions and see the results. The half-reality of games can thus be defined as an experience depending on iterative feedback between a real body and a virtual world.

In *The Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty describes how the active and involved body is what ultimately infers perceived reality. In relation to the gaming experience, the notion of the active body can be made clearer if we consider the joystick as an object in the light of Heidegger’s notion of the ready-to-hand and Merleau-Ponty’s description of tool use. In his example of the hammer, Heidegger argues that we do not see the hammer as an object in and of itself, but instead in the context of equipment, something that is there in order to do something. The hammer is ready-to-hand, and only when it breaks and loses its usefulness do we see it as merely “there”, present-at-hand [6]. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty argues that tools function as an extension of the human body, once the body has mastered the tool. Using the example of the blind man’s cane, he argues that the experience of a tool we are using differs substantially from the experience of an object in the world. It ceases to be an external object and instead becomes part of the experience of the body-subject. The blind man is not aware of his cane’s position in physical space; instead the cane is his transparent access to other objects [10]. Anyone who has ever played a video game will know that the process of transforming the joystick from

an object that is present-at-hand to ready-to-hand is fundamental to the gaming experience. A game that does not provide a relatively smooth process of allowing the controller to become an extended part of the player's body will generally be considered flawed.

If we can argue that the joypad functions as an extended part of the player's body, video games may be seen as a subset of the player's experienced reality. Questions regarding graphic realism or correspondence to outside reality are thus rendered less important than questions regarding the player's actions and expectations. Video games, then, are half real, not only because we play by real rules, as Juul argues, but because we play in real bodies. Games have a real main protagonist –the player. Regardless of whether the protagonist is a famous avatar that has established an autonomous identity and history, like Lara Croft or Mario, the moment I pick up the joypad to play *Tomb Raider*, I do not become Lara, but rather, Lara becomes me. Espen Aarseth touches on this in his notorious claim that “the dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently. When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it” [1].

Due to both presenting themselves as moving images on a screen interface, we tend to easily make comparisons between video games and cinema. In fact, the push towards increasingly photorealistic scenarios that will resemble the cinematic even closer is a well-known driving force of the entire game industry. Although it is widely acknowledged that games are defined by interactivity and as such cannot be compared easily with cinema, in discussions with regards to realism the focus on the graphic and cinematic remains. This comes as no great surprise, as any new medium that struggles for cultural legitimacy will attempt to mimic an established predecessor. It is no coincidence that the first decades of photography were dominated by portraiture and landscapes, as the new technology was attempting to show itself as worthy as the established art of painting by simulating the most common and celebrated painting techniques. If we continue to consider games purely from the point of the imaginary, as closed systems, the focus on cinematic realism is understandable. However, if we consider games from the point of view of the body, of physical action, the game play experience becomes the antithesis of the cinema experience. The cinema experience is defined by darkness, immobility and silence, and the film is an autonomous object in itself. If you put a DVD in to a machine and leave the room, the film will keep running its course on the screen. Once certain choices have been made with regards to how the DVD should display, the viewer has no control over the actual course of the film. If you put a piece of video game software into a Playstation console and leave the room, however, the game stops and you are left with a stagnant image. The game needs a player in order to be a complete

experience, as the game play is entirely reliant on the actions of the player.

Alexander Galloway, in his recent book *Gaming, essays on Algorithmic Culture*, goes some way towards developing a definition of realism in video games based on the notion that games involve physical actions, and that the player has a role in determining the realism of a given game. Galloway's notion of realism draws upon the Bazinian idea interpreted by post-war European filmmakers and theorists, i.e. realism as a Marxist critique of society through a detailed mimetic representation of the disenfranchised classes [2]. Claiming that games compel players to perform acts, as opposed to merely engage in the act of looking, Galloway argues that realism in games must correspond to the player's experience in order to be realistic. This again leads him to argue that a game like *America's Army* cannot be described as realistic, as most of its players will not have any knowledge or experience in the situation it depicts. The game *Under Ash*, on the other hand, which has a similar format and game play mechanics to the former, but is seen from the vantage point of a Palestinian fighter, set in the occupied territories, can be seen as creating gamic realism when played by a Palestinian who will know the situations and experiences represented [5]. Although he acknowledges physical action on behalf of the player, Galloway's idea of realism is tied up with the ideological notion of social realism. It thus requires a degree of correspondence to scenarios present in the physical world. Yet, if we consider the issue of realism from the phenomenological notion of bodily perception, we can argue that realism is dependent on actions rendering expected results in a game. The question of realism is thus tied to the experience of the player, rather than the constructed environment of the game.

To return to the idea of an aesthetics of control that began this essay, if seen through the notion of the body-subject control would mean the ability of the player to affect the virtual environment in which she moves. Realism in games thus stems from the player's experience of control over the game. A phenomenological reading of player experience can show how realism in games, and subsequent interpretation of games' expressive potential, must always begin with the idea that a player protagonist drives the game through physical action. Video games cannot be mimetic representations of the world, as established by cinematic conventions, because of the role of the player. Through Merleau-Ponty's notion that the body is our main medium for having a world, we can argue that gamic realism is always body-subjective, and reliant not on depiction but on action. If my actions render the expected result, I feel in control of the game and experience the game as real. The world on the screen in front of me is imaginary, yet my actions within it are real.

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