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Phenomenology and Video Games: Embodied Experience

Abstract: This paper opens a way in which we can consider video games in the relation to the player. The topic will incorporate a phenomenological method offered to us by Merleau-Ponty. In this regard, phenomenology and video games have been complementary for decades now and, in this regard, many philosophers started considering them from the basis of the embodiment theory. The pur-pose of this paper is to enter the discussion which is based on the mentioned basis and to introduce the new mode of thinking about the relation between video games and embodiment – immersion. Philosophers concerned with the expansion of Merleau-Ponty's theory in the world of video games do not give the phenomenon of immersion enough importance. In this regard, the main claim is the following – reconstructing the embodiment theory of video games with an introduction of the concept of immersion.

Keywords: video games, embodiment, immersion, Merleau-Ponty, body

"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."[1]

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[1] Sommerseth H., (2007). Gamic Realism: Player, Perception and Action in Video Game Play.

Introduction

The topic concerning video games will seem rather new if we consider it in comparison with the whole history of philosophical examination. And, by being so, philosophers have used their preferred methodologies to explore this phenomenon. In one of my earlier works, I have discussed the phenomena of video games through the theoretical basis given to us by virtue theorists, as well as cognitive psychologists. One of the benefits of exploring video games in a philosophical context is the ability to consider them from various angles and provide further explanatory power. The reader can assume that, by the title of my paper, this topic will use phenomenological theoretical scope in order to describe certain spheres of playing video games. The theory I have in mind is the one offered by Merleau-Ponty; to be more precise, the theory of the body. I propose a claim that we can use this theory to describe the relation which is player - game based. Also, I would like to make this claim only about first person-based video games. Having said that, I would like to present my overall argument in this section so I could carry on with discussing the particulars.

Firstly, I would like to define the scope of this paper by proposing the following:

P1. Video Games have been explained by using various methods.

P2. The philosophical field of phenomenology can also be used to explore certain questions about video games.

C1. This paper shall use the theoretical basis of phenomenology in order to answer the questions I would like to propose. (From P1. and P2.)

While this is cleared, the theory that I have in mind is the one proposed by Merleau-Ponty concerning the theory of the embodiment. The main thing that I would argue for is the following:

P1. Theory of the body offered by Merleau-Ponty offers a body-ob-ject differentiation. Objects are connected to my practical needs and are there to be used[2] On the other hand, a body always perceives the external world, and it perceives itself not merely as an object.

P2. Gaming is an activity of playing video games using a device with which we operate within the game.

C1. We are using controllers, or devices with which we operate within the game merely as tools; objects which we interact. (from P1. and P2.)

P3. First person video games offer us the perception of the virtual realm through the eyes of our avatar, which is given to us in a similar manner as our perception of the horizons in the non-virtual realm.

P4. Immersion is a phenomenon which links us with the world of video games and enables us to perceive virtual reality like it is "real".

C2. With the use of objects that are the controllers, we are initiated in the virtual realm by immersing ourselves within in. (from C1. and P4.)

C3. By using the embodiment theory, we can argue that the avatar in the first-person video games is an extension of our body and, therefore, through the eyes of the avatar we perceive the virtual world. (from P1. and P4.)

C4. Having said that, the main claim of this paper is that, by using the objects to fulfill our practical needs (controllers in order to play video games), we are drawn into the video game by im-

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[2] Priest S., (2000). *Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body-subject*. Nursing Philosophy - NURS PHILOS. 1. 173-174. 10.1046/j.1466-769x.2000.00019.x.

mersion after which we embody the avatar who becomes our extension of perception.

2. Phenomenology - Merleau-Ponty and the theory of the embodied subject

"...we come across the idea that rather than a mind *and* a body, man is mind *with* a body, a being who can only get to the truth of things because its body is, as it were, embedded in those things."[3]

The importance of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology can be seen in its implication on the discourse of materialism, empiricism, and idealism.[4] Namely, the theory of the body offers a holistic account on the symbiosis between mind and the body. Merleau-Ponty's answer to idealism can be derived from the quote above; namely, although we do have a mind, we are not *only* our minds. The same goes with empiricism and materialism - although we do perceive external objects using our body which includes the modes of perception, we are also not only our physical forms, but con-scious ones as well.

Having said that, the main goal of *Phenomenology of Perception* is showing in which ways does the body perceive reality. I believe it is an imperative to portray the distinction between body-subject and body-object, following the outlook given to us by Stephen Priest. As I have mentioned before, objects are always in my field of practical interest. I experience objects in external reality, and I use them to fulfill my practical goals. For example, I perceive things such as - a pen, a phone, a piece of paper, coffee etc. While I do so, my main interest in these things is using them to - write

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[3] Merleau-Ponty, M., (2004). *World of Perception,* Routledge, Oxfordshire.

[4] Toadvine T., (2016). *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/merleau-ponty/

with the pen, call someone, or browse the internet with my phone, write on the paper, drink the coffee etc. Objects occupy the space in which they can be manipulated by the movement of our bodies. On the other hand, the body is not an object, but it is who we are as well. We cannot perceive the body merely as an object as well, it is connected to who we are and the consequence of that is the body perceiving itself. As Priest points out - the body is always an active force which perceives the external world as well as it-self, it is the margin of all of our perceptions.[5] Another thing worth mentioning from the *Phenomenology of Perception* is the idea that our subjectivity is *always* embodied.[6] Our every action, everything that we are and that we are in the process of doing - is a product of embodiment. Embodiment is the basis for experiencing and finding ourselves as the being-in-the-world. In this instance, I would like to draw out the main dimensions of the body in Merleau-Ponty's thought which Bernhard Waldenfels sketches out for us. He states that the dimensions of a functioning body[7] are various, however, I would like to point out only some of them that will serve to the needs of this paper: passivity and anonymity, perspectivity, pro-spective and retrospective action.[8] I would like to point out the im-portant descriptions of these dimensions. Passivity is closely linked to the functions that our body does without our intentionality. We are aware of the processes which our body goes into, however, we do not start these processes willingly. Anonymity comes into play

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[5] Priest S., (2000). *Merleau-Ponty's concept of the body-subject*. Nursing Philosophy - NURS PHILOS. 1. 173-174. 10.1046/j.1466-769x.2000.00019.x.

[6] Merleau-Ponty, M., (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception,* Humanities Press, New York.

[7] In short - a functioning body is the body that "does its job" of offering us perceptive power.

[8] Waldenfels B., (2008) *The Central Role of the Body in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology*, Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, 39:1, 76-87, DOI: 10.1080/00071773.2008.11006630

here - it is not us who is an initiator. Perspectivity means that the body is both experienced and that which experience. I can see my body as existing, however, I can see my body through the use of my body; this aspect is a circular relation. Another dimension of a functioning body is the ability to offer us knowledge about the pos-sibilities of our future action, as well as holding past experiences within it.

By saying that, I would like to presuppose many consequences and the theoretical baggage that arise from this theory, however, the length of this paper stops me from getting into the further detail and, therefore, I would like to focus on the general outlook as I hope it will be enough for the reader to make sense of my central thesis. The point from which I would like to start is the quote from the pa-per written by Robert Farrow and Ioanna Iacovides: "Merleau-Pon-ty's analysis is of special interest with reference to the experience of being 'in the game' because of his emphasis on the centrality of the body and the embodied nature of human experience."[9]

3. The meeting point - immersion and embodiment

The relation of phenomenology and video games is something rather new. In fact, I have been able to find only a handful of papers concerning this subject. However, the papers that I have found have similar goals as I do - to provide a way in which we can think of our video game experience as an embodied one. The papers that I have in mind were cited in the earlier parts of this paper - one from Robert Farrow and Ioanna Iacovides, as well as one from Hanna Sommerseth; with them, I would also like to add the paper written by Timothy Crick. While I develop my overall argument, I would

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[9] Farrow R., Iacovides I., (2014). *Gaming and the Limits of Digital Embodiment*, Springer Science and Business Media, Philos. Technol. 27:221–233, DOI 10.1007/s13347-013-0111-1

point to some strengths and weaknesses of these authors. Having said that, let us start with that goal at hand.

Imagine the following situation - we come home from a long day, and we have an urge to sit down, and press play on our console. We get the CD of the video game *Bioshock: Infinite,* put it into the console, lay back and start being pulled into the world of New Columbia - a futuristic neo-Victorian city floating in the sky. We see the sublime visuals of a world that looks so mesmerizing through the eyes of a player-controlled character. We start using the control-ler to get around that game - fulfilling tasks, exploring the game world and interacting with other non-player characters (NPCs).

Some things need to be pointed out from this example. Firstly - a player is a subject who is initiated in the activity of playing video games. By doing so, he is playing video games through the use of a controlling device - in this instance - video game controller, or a joystick. The player then, enters the virtual world in which he commits certain actions by using the controller. Now, this is a pretty rudimentary description, so, having said that, let us open the door for the phenomenological explanation on what is going on here.

First, let us take a look at the controller itself. Based on the spirit of phenomenological thought, we can describe the control-ler merely as a tool, or, as Heidegger would call it - ready-to-hand. Heidegger gives an example of this by using a portrayal of a ham-mer. We do not perceive a hammer as an object itself, but we see it as a context-based tool, shaped by the means to an end[10]. We experi-ence a hammer as a means of hammering. Therefore, the controller is merely a tool for us to participate in the activity of playing video games, its existence becomes liquidated by the very act itself. This is somehow noted in the paper written by Sommereth, however, it leaves much to be desired in further elaboration on how we really

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[10]Heidegger, M (1962). *Being and Time*. Oxford: Blackwell

use a controller[11] I believe that, In this regard, video game controller becomes an extension of our bodily function. We can remember the aspect of passivity that we have talked about when we mentioned the functions of the body. The body constantly forms habits, in this regard, the habits that we form by operating a video game controller become passive and mechanistic. Most of the time when we play video games, we forget that we are using video game controllers. This is a very important instance which is not strange to the thought of Merleau-Ponty. He talks about an object being *transplanted* into our bodies after being accustomed to them.[12] For example - while playing a guitar, using a walking stick, writing with a pen, scrolling through the news with our phones etc. In the same regard, video game controllers become an extension of our bodies. Through those extensions, we are operating within one virtual realm.

Now, something that that leaves to be desired in every mentioned paper is the role of immersion. Immersing oneself within a video game is being fully involved in the virtual world that it is offering. The concept of immersion is not liquidating only an object, or a tool which we use to operate within that virtual realm, but it enables us to put the whole reality in which we reside into brackets and change it for the virtual one. This is, I believe, rather important because, if we are to talk about the phenomenological perception within one video game, we must talk about it after the act of im-mersion.

When it comes to games themselves, I have picked *Bioshock: Infinite* for the reason of it being a first-person video game. It is important to note the point made by Laurie Taylor - "most first-

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[11] Sommerseth H., (2007). *Gamic Realism: Player, Perception and Action in Video Game Play.*

[12] Merleau-Ponty, M., (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception,* Humanities Press, New York.

person games, the player operates on the game world, but never within, which allows the world to be constructed from an imagined viewpoint".[13]When we play an avatar in third person video games, or, when we control certain objects in the various other game genres, we still cannot fully come to the embodied experience because we perceive the otherness in those avatars/objects. It is only within the first-person video games that we can fully play ourselves. Now, it is true that, in the case of *Bioshock: Infinite*, the player-controlled character does have his narrative-based personality and a place in the world, however, during the gameplay itself, that is also liqui-dated within our experience. This is, sadly, only noted within the paper of Timothy Crick[14] and completely ignored in other papers.

When embodying a player-controlled character, we have the same perception experience as we do in our real lives. Objects are given to us in the same manner as they are in our real world. Although, we are much more limited with our interaction with them, however, perception of them goes through the same epistemic mod-el. Applying Hurselian model of epistemic experience in the video game seems like a natural step after this phenomenological basis, however, I would leave that for another time. While playing with our character, we get the intuition about what is possible/impossible within the game. For example, while playing a game and jumping from one ledge on to another, we are getting prospectively of fu-ture actions as this one is. Through trial and error, we construct the intuition about the limits of our embodied character with the same precision we have about the limits of our own body. We do not mea-sure the jumping distance; we *know* it through the experience of our

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13   Taylor, L. (2003). *When seams fall apart: Video game space and the player.* Game Studies [online], http://www.gamestudies.org/0302/taylor/

[14]Circk, T. (2011) *The Game Body: Towards a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming*, Games and Culture, Sage Pub Journals, DOI: 10.1177/1555412010364980

embodied character. Also, it is worth noticing that the virtual realm that we become a part of also invokes bodily responses. Adrenaline, fear, joy, nervous reactions, dopamine invocation etc. Imagine a situation in which we are being in danger of being "killed" within the game. Our bodies produce a response which would correspond to the response we would get if we were in the same danger in the real world (although, in a much smaller degree). In short, it seems like a plausible conclusion to imagine the first-person video games as an extension of our perceptive power *because* of the fact that we embody our characters.

Conclusion and further proposal

So far, we have shown in which way video games can be seen as something that can be explored by the field of phenomenology. By using the basis of phenomenological thought, we have explained the relation which a player has with his player-controlled character. Merleau-Ponty's theory is probably the best bet we have into re-constructing the player inside the virtual world and enabling him to perceive it. Now, this opens the door to further investigation which this paper is not concerned with. Namely, in which way exactly do we experience the virtual phenomena? Can the phenomenological model be used to show the limits and the possibilities of our percep-tion within the virtual realm? I believe that Husserl's epistemology will prove to be quite useful in this task, but, as I have mentioned, on that, another time.

Sažetak

Ovaj rad otvara način na koji možemo promatrati video igre u odnosu na igrača. Tema će uključivati fenomenološku metodu koju nam je ponudio Merleau-Ponty. U tom smislu, fenomenologija i

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videoigre su već desetljećima komplementarne te radi toga mnogi su ih filozofi počeli razmatrati iz temelja teorije utjelovljenja. Svrha ovog rada je ući u raspravu koja se temelji na navedenoj osnovi te uvesti novi način promišljanja odnosa videoigara i utjelovljenja – imerzije. Filozofi koji se bave širenjem Merleau-Pontyjeve teorije u svijetu videoigara ne pridaju dovoljno važnosti fenomenu imerzi-je. Samim time, glavna tvrdnja je sljedeća – rekonstrukcija teorije utjelovljenja videoigara uz uvođenje koncepta imerzije.

Ključne riječi: video igre, utjelovljenje, uranjanje, Merleau-Ponty, tijelo

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