

Free-for-itself as Player and as Ludic Subject

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While the notion of ‘player freedom’ and the linked privileging of the act of choosing have become buzz-phrases in popular discourses surrounding videogames, comparatively little has been done to offer a concrete theorization of how this freedom is determined for, and lived out by, the player *in the act of playing the game*. Drawing on the existential and embodied phenomenology of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as on the deployment of these philosophical frameworks within game studies by Olli Tapio Leino (2010) and Rune Klevjer (2006; 2012) respectively, this paper asserts that such a theorization can be established on the basis of a phenomenological understanding of the player’s relation to the contingent actuality of the game, and must be focused on the *ludic subject* that constitutes the existential perspective or free-for-itself the player inhabits in relation to the game, and which makes it possible for the game to be brought to light as a factual situation for the player.

1. Facticity and situation

Though it is first coined in the writings of the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1794/5),¹ the term ‘facticity’ as I wish to use it here is borrowed from the existential project of Jean-Paul Sartre, where it refers to one of the cornerstones of the understanding of the individual’s being-in-the-world. Central to Sartre’s philosophy is the division of being into *for-itself* and *in-itself*. Developing the basic phenomenological notion of the relation of the subject to the world, and specifically echoing Martin Heidegger’s earlier division between the self-contained being-in-itself of things in the world and human being or *Dasein*, ‘in-itself’ refers to inanimate objects that simply *are* in the world, while ‘for-itself’ refers to the human subject that, in having consciousness of itself, can be a being *for* itself (that is, can be present to its own consciousness) in a way that the in-

¹ In Fichte’s writing, unlike in Sartre or Heidegger, ‘facticity’ is framed as the material contingency that the individual subject is to overcome in a transcendental leap into idealism. This is a radically divergent framing that emblemizes the distinction between Fichte’s post-Kantian idealism and Heidegger and Sartre’s existentialist phenomenology; however, a commentary on this philosophical opposition in the approach to facticity is outside the remit of this paper.

itself cannot. The implications this has upon an understanding of the phenomenal nature of subjectivity and the subject's perspective on the world and on itself are vast: for the purposes of this paper, it is vital to note that, according to Sartre, the for-itself's being-in-the-world can be understood as its *facticity*, the contingency of the in-itself which it encounters as the horizon of its world, determining the existential situation in which it finds itself and which determines the possibilities and parameters of its free being. It is that undeniable, contingent actuality which the for-itself takes on as the ground of its being and the horizon against which its freedom is measured:

...the for-itself is sustained by a perpetual contingency for which it assumes the responsibility and which it assimilates without ever being able to suppress it. This perpetually evanescent contingency of the in-itself [...] is what we shall call the *facticity* of the for-itself. It is this facticity which permits us to say that the for-itself *is*, that it exists, although we can never *realize* the facticity, and although we always apprehend it through the for-itself. (1966[1943], 131)

The for-itself can be said to exist, to *be*, precisely because it finds itself in relation to its factual situation: that is, it finds itself always already inextricably a part of being, located in a contingent actuality – which brings with it another Heideggerean echo, this time to the *Geworfenheit* (or “thrownness”) into the world which the earlier philosopher identified as a basic quality of Dasein's being,² and which he similarly linked explicitly to the question of facticity: Dasein, Heidegger writes, is thrown:

...into its “there”, indeed, it is thrown in such a way that, as Being-in-the-world, it is the “there”. The expression “thrownness” is meant to suggest the *facticity of its being delivered over*. (2008[1927], 174, italics in original)

Facticity, then, refers to the situation in which the for-itself finds itself: it “*is not the factuality of the factum brutum [brute fact] of something present-at-hand, but a characteristic of Dasein's Being*” (ibid.). An unsituated, self-sufficient for-itself – perhaps something along the lines of Descartes' disembodied, self-generating *cogito* – is a conceptual impossibility; simultaneously, we can only apprehend the in-itself as it plays out as facticity *for* the consciousness of the for-itself: that is, as it manifests itself phenomenally for the experiencing subject, rather than as it might be in itself, in its essential quality. World and subject prove to be inextricable.

² In fact, the literal translation of *Dasein* as ‘being-there’ reveals the importance to Heidegger's thought of the worldliness of the individual's being.

Olli Tapio Leino has already applied the notion of facticity to videogames, arguing – by means of a reference to Sartre – for an understanding of the materiality of videogames as “*extended facticities*, extensions of the “concrete details against which our freedom exists and is limited”” (2010, 11). The notion of the game as an *extension* of the player’s factual situation is one I shall unpack – and put into question – at a later stage; for now, it is sufficient to note that the facticity established by the game’s materiality thereby serves as the foundation for the establishment of what Leino terms the *gameplay condition* (2009, 12; 2010, 101) – the condition of responsibility for one’s freedom of choice resulting from the game object’s material upholding of the consequences of one’s choices. This is a point Leino elaborates against the background of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s treatment of play – particularly relevant here is Gadamer’s observation that the player “enjoys a freedom of decision which at the same time is endangered and irrevocably limited” (2001[1960], 106).

2. *Contingency and resistance*

What is it, then, that sets these limits upon the player’s freedom – but, paradoxically, in setting boundaries, gives a form to freedom and brings it into being? Let us take, as an example, the childhood game “I Spy.” This guessing game commences when one player recites the phrase, “I spy with my little eye something beginning with...”, concluded with a letter of the alphabet. This player will have in mind an object, visible to all players of the game, whose name begins with the given letter. We can call this object the *target*. The object of the game is for the guessing player/s to identify the target; the spying player must choose as unlikely and difficult a target as possible in order to keep the guessing player/s from making the right guess.

Imagine that, taking on the role of the spying player, I have chosen as my target the church I can see across the square from the café in which I am currently seated, announcing the start of the game by stating that, “I spy with my little eye something beginning with ‘C’”. I have, in effect, given the *target* a specific quality: that of being identified with the church. There are two points that need to be kept in mind. First, in order for the game to be played, the target should, of course, not be so obvious as to be immediately evident to the guessing players: if the identity of the target is evident as soon as the question is set, the game is over before it has begun. The freedom that characterizes the player’s project of play, then, takes the form of a striving towards an end which is not yet actual, and, thus, still needs to be achieved: freedom, in other words,

can only play out across the gap between the for-itself in its actual situation and the end which is made to stand against this situation. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “if freedom is to have *room* in which to move, if it is to be describable as freedom, there must be something to hold it away from its objectives, it must have a *field*” (2002[1945], 509).

Sartre explicitly describes this in terms of the contingent situation of the in-itself that is encountered by the free-for-itself. The gap that needs to be overcome is that between the actual state of affairs in which the in-itself is met, and the non-actual state of affairs which is to be achieved:

We are free when the final term by which we make known to ourselves what we are is an end [...] this *end* can be transcendent only if it is separated from us at the same time as it is accessible. Only an ensemble of real existents can separate us from this end – in the same way that this end can be conceived only as a state-to-come of the real existents which separate me from it. (1966[1943], 621)

Sartre accounts for this with the notion of *resistance*, which he defines as an intrinsic aspect of the notion of freedom:

...the resistance which freedom reveals in the existent, far from being a danger to freedom, results only in enabling it to arise as freedom. There can be a free-for-itself only as engaged in a resisting world. (ibid.)

Let us return to “I Spy”: as we pointed out, the target set by the spying player needs to offer the guessing players this element of resistance in order to structure their free guessing: the guessing players are faced with an initial situation where their guess is non-identical to the target, and must strive to achieve a situation where the guess and the target overlap.

However, there is a second point we need to pay attention to regarding the target-as-game-component as it figures in the player’s project of play – and this is that it must steadfastly retain its contingent quality. Let us suppose, having offered a number of incorrect guesses as to the nature of the target (the coffee cup on the table, the car parked in the square, etc.), one of the guessing players finally makes the correct guess. However, not wishing to lose the game just yet, I cheat and change the quality of the target, identifying it instead with the cat I can see napping in the shade of the parked car. If the guessing players suspect me of having changed the target (for example, if I give myself away by hesitating before declaring their answer to be incorrect), they will accuse me of cheating, and the game might well break down entirely. The guessing players’ attempts to identify the target can only make sense as ludic actions if the target is a fixed

entity that *can* be identified: with my arbitrary modification of the nature of the target, the incontrovertible actuality of the game components – their ontological status as “real” and undeniable (Aarseth 2009) – would have been destabilized beyond recourse.

3. *Obstacles and affordances*

Of course, what the attentive reader will have already understood from the example of “I Spy” is that it is not enough simply to consider the contingency of the game component as “an unnamable and unthinkable *residuum which belongs to the in-itself*” (Sartre 1966[1943], 620). This contingency can only manifest itself as meaningful within the field determined by the for-itself’s project of freedom insofar as it is revealed as an obstacle or an affordance in relation to the working-out of this project. As such, its factual nature depends precisely on the encounter between the individual’s projects and this resistance:

...the coefficient of adversity in things can not be an argument against our freedom, for it is *by us - i.e.*, by the preliminary positing of an end - that this coefficient of adversity arises. A particular crag, which manifests a profound resistance if I wish to displace it, will be on the contrary a valuable aid if I want to climb upon it in order to look over the countryside. In itself - if one can even imagine what the crag can be in itself - it is neutral; that is, it waits to be illuminated by an end in order to manifest itself as adverse or helpful” (ibid.).

In the development of an embodied phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty draws on, and expands upon, Sartre’s understanding of freedom, even going so far as to use Sartre’s example as a starting-point:

...what are called obstacles to freedom are in reality deployed by it. An unclimbable rock face, a large or small, vertical or slanting rock, are things which have no meaning for anyone who is not intending to surmount them, for a subject whose projects do not carve out such determinate forms from the uniform mass of the *in itself* and cause an orientated world to arise - a significance in things. (507)

In addition, it is only against the background of the instrumental capabilities of the individual’s embodiment in the world that the factual situation can gain meaning as affordances and limitations towards the individual’s projects:

...it can manifest itself in one or the other way only within an instrumental-complex which is already established. Without picks and piolets, paths already worn, and a technique of climbing, the crag would neither be easy nor difficult to

climb; the question would not be posited, it would not support any relation of any kind with the technique of mountain climbing” (Sartre 1966[1943], 620).

A second game example will serve to illustrate this point. If a player of *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) takes on the project of building a hilltop stronghold, this project is only rendered possible by the factual situation established by the game’s virtual landscape as it stands against the player. It is only thanks to the concrete contingency of the stone blocks as game components that they can be grasped as an element of the in-itself encountered by the player: that they both limit the player’s free movement (by standing in her way) and make it possible in the first place (by setting the boundaries and giving shape to the domain across which walking is possible). Moreover, the player, as a subject in the *Minecraft* world, exists in a relation to the stone block that allows it to be brought forth, within the subject’s factual situation, as something that can be quarried. It is this possibility that, in the first place, renders the building of a stronghold conceivable as a project.

At the same time as they establish the conditions of possibility for the project, the stone blocks also embody the element of resistance that is an equally intrinsic element of facticity. The player, having taken on the project of building the stronghold, cannot simply will the stone blocks of the hillside into the configuration she desires. The materiality of the stone blocks inflexibly upholds their contingent actuality at a given coordinate within the game space, and the player is required to work in order to overcome this resistance, expending time in quarrying each stone block, transporting it to its desired new location and placing it there. It is this resistance which structures the effort that can be understood as constituting game play.³ As Leino writes, “the gameplay condition is manifested in *concrete* aspects of the experience” (2010, 218).

At the limit of this resistance, Gadamer stresses the factor of “risk” as a structuring element in play, noting that is the coefficient of any project of play: “even in the case of games in which one tries to perform tasks that one has set oneself, there is a risk that they will not ‘work’, ‘succeed’, or ‘succeed again’, which is the attraction of the game” (2001[1960], 106). It is against this risk of failure that the player’s efforts gain significance. If the player realizes her designs for her stronghold have been in error, and the two walls she has busied herself with constructing for the past hour do not intersect at the desired angle, the ludic materiality of the stone blocks as game components

³ By the same token, then, game play can be understood as the effort required to overcome the resistance put forward the ludic material to actualization of the player’s project.

imposes upon her the consequences of her choices: she cannot simply choose to retroactively rethink her actions and build the walls at a different angle, because the actual arrangement of stone blocks stands as an undeniable testament to her choices and actions, one which she has no choice but to accept. In an extreme case, as Leino notes, a particularly pronounced or repeated failure of the project of play can lead to the enforcement of a “tangible limit” to the freedom to play (2010, 217). If the walls of the player’s stronghold, unfinished at nightfall, provide no shelter from the various monsters that come out at night, it is likely that, unless the player takes other precautions, the death of the playable figure is the outcome. In this manner, the player is made responsible for her own freedom, including the responsibility for her own ludic being.

4. *World and subject*

We have, so far, characterized the factual situation encountered by the player as resulting from the way in which the contingency of the in-itself is shaped into an ordered form (which is another way of saying ‘world’) and given meaning in the light of the projects of the for-itself. It is time to make this observation more concrete, by attempting to more definitively glimpse the nature of this form and the process by which it is achieved.

To set us off along this path, the notion of the “instrumental-complex” that Sartre invokes in the consideration of the crag as it is construed as an obstacle or an affordance in the light of the for-itself’s project is a crucial one that it here becomes necessary to unpack. What Sartre means by this term is an understanding of the world (in the sense of a world-about me as embodied subject) as a structured form determined by the lines of instrumentality extending along the lines of possible actions – as Sartre puts it, in a memorable image, “the world as the correlate of the possibilities which I *am* appears from the moment of my upsurge as the enormous skeletal outline of all my possible actions” (1966[1943], 425). It is within a world understood in these terms that things-in-themselves can be brought into view as significant, one way or another, for the player’s project of freedom: “it is in relation to an original instrumental complex that things reveal their resistance and their adversity” (ibid., 428).

At heart, this is a more specific expression of the fundamental phenomenological tenet of the inextricable intermeshing of perceived world and perceiving subject, understood as mutually implicating poles of intentional experience – we should here recall Edmund Husserl’s statement that the world is brought forth into consciousness as “*my world-about-me*”, as an experiential structure that exists *for me*, organized around my

subjective standpoint within it, and, inseparably, becoming also “*the world in which I find myself*”, that is, the world against which I can come into view as a subject (2012[1913], 53)). In the light of this paper’s purposes, a crucial point comes into view here: at the same time as the for-itself’s project of freedom brings into view the world in the particular form it gains from its perspective, it also brings *itself* into view in relation to the world.

5. *For-itself and the question of the body*

This leads us to ask what form and nature the for-itself manifests in when it is brought into view by means of its world-establishing engagement with the in-itself. Inevitably, phenomenological investigations in this direction have led in the direction of the body. Merleau-Ponty writes that:

Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system. (2002[1945], 235)

Merleau-Ponty’s foregrounding of the body as the for-itself’s seat in the world therefore identifies the question of embodiment as the necessary baseline of any engagement with existential questions of being-in-the-world, and, as such, of freedom. The body – and the range of bodily capabilities or “I can”s that it affords (ibid., 159) in relation to the world – is the *origo* or point of origin of the vectors of action that constitute Sartre’s instrumental-complex, and, as such, is what is presupposed in the conscious or unconscious positing of any project:

Merleau-Ponty claims that all these projects *presuppose* that man is able to move his body, to act, to perceive. [...] The fact that a human being is able to accomplish all these different tasks involves no problems only and exclusively on the presupposition that man’s capacity of moving his body and his ability to perceive are self-evident. (Kockelmans 1970, 275)

More than a purely practical consideration, however, foregrounding of the body as the foundation of being-in-the-world emerges as an ontological necessity. Starting from the simple observation that sense experience involves a communion of the sensing and the sensed – a tangible point of encounter – Merleau-Ponty proceeds to make the case that this must, necessarily, imply an ontic equivalence between the perceiving subject and the perceived object; that is, a presence of the for-itself within the ontological domain of the in-itself:

...between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle [...] This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part. (1968, 133)

There is no reason to make a distinction between the senses, and if this is true of touch, it is equally true of vision: “he who looks must not himself be foreign to the world that he looks at” (ibid., 134). Again, the import of Merleau-Ponty’s observation is clear: an encounter with the things of the world can only occur on a shared ontological ground. However, while this establishes an opening through which the for-itself can gain access to its situation, it brings into view a new problem: namely, how do we reconcile the status of the body as it is lived, that is, as the embodiment of the for-itself in the world, with its simultaneous status as a thing in the world – that is, as an in-itself?

...if man were a pure consciousness (for-itself) or a mere thing among others (in-itself) he could not be “in” or “toward” the world. Man is not a pure consciousness because a pure consciousness is a gaze which can unfold everything and for which everything lies already in the open, whereas man’s experience must be characterized fundamentally by the idea of resistance, which, in turn, implies complications, obstacles, and ambiguities. Man is not a thing either. For although it is true that a thing can be said to coexist with other things, it certainly cannot transcend them, since it does not have a horizon, it is not “in” or “toward” the world. (Kockelmans 1970, 274)

Sartre acknowledges that the for-itself, as an embodied being in the world, is possessed of the same ‘thingness’ as the in-itself it encounters: “it *is* as pure contingency inasmuch as for it as for things in the world, as for this wall, this tree, this cup, the original question can be posited: “Why is this being exactly such and not otherwise?”” (1966[1943], 127). It is for this reason that the body can itself be encountered as a thing-in-the-world: I can examine my own injured hand, and, in the detachment of this perspective, my relation to my hand is much the same as would be that of a physician who might be treating it. However, Sartre argues, this is *not* the way in which our body exists for us in the mode of the for-itself: “my body as it is *for me* does not appear to me in the midst of the world” (ibid., 402) – instead, as we have seen, the body is *lived* as the *origo* of an instrumental-complex, as the organization and point of origin of the world as form, and, hence, as indivisible from this world, that it has its form. The two aspects of the body are, for

Sartre, incongruous: “either [my body] is a thing among other things, or else it is that by which things are revealed to me. But it can not be both at the same time” (ibid.).

As Joseph J. Kockelmans notes, Sartre’s understanding of the body as “a living dialectic between the body-as-instrument and the body-taken-as-bare-fact [...] allows us to understand how an ek-sisting consciousness can inhere in the world and, at the same time, be a project of that same world” (1970, 276). However, the strict division Sartre delineates between the two senses of the body is problematic, given that “this ontology is essentially built upon the radical and irreconcilable opposition between the “for-itself” and the “in-itself” in which the Cartesian dualism of the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa* is not only restored, but even aggravated” (ibid.).

Merleau-Ponty’s response to this difficulty is to intertwine the two aspects of the body: to find, in fact, in this dual nature the essence of its character *as* body.

We say therefore that our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself, and its double belongingness to the order of the “object” and to the order of the “subject” reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders. (1968, 137)

In a famous passage, Merleau-Ponty illustrates this double-sidedness of the body by means of a meditation on the hand as both an instrument of touch *and* as being itself open, through the touch of the other hand, to being encountered as a thing-in-the-world: “in a veritable touching of the touch, when my right hand touches my left hand [...] the “touching subject” passes over to the rank of the touched” (ibid., 134).

What impact does this have upon the existential conception of freedom? We have observed that, for both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, freedom can only be thought in relation to the factual situation towards which the for-itself’s projects are directed. What is now made apparent is that if it is necessary for the for-itself to “exist in some in-itself” – namely, the body – “in that way it carves out a certain facticity *of its own* which as in-itself it is unable to possess” (Kockelmans 1970, 277). It is not only a matter of “adding” the facticity of the body to the facticity of the situation it gathers around it, considering it simply as part of the totality of the in-itself encountered as a factual situation – which does not overcome the problem of the separation between the body-in-itself and the body-for-itself – but rather of refocusing our understanding of facticity, and of the structure of the situation as lived by the for-itself, in terms of how it is brought to light by the facticity of the body.

As Merleau-Ponty argues, it is not the in-itself that is encountered outside of ourselves that sets limits to our freedom, and, in doing so, gives shape to our being-in-the-world. Rather, it is our embodiment itself that sets these limits:

Underlying myself as a thinking subject, who am able to take my place at will on Sirius or on the earth's surface, there is, therefore, as it were a natural self which does not budge from its terrestrial situation and which constantly adumbrates absolute valuations [...] In so far as I have hands, feet, a body, I sustain around me intentions which are not dependent upon my decisions and which affect my surroundings in a way which I do not choose (2002[1945], 511).

Or, in short, "there is an autochthonous significance of the world which is constituted in the dealings which our incarnate existence has with it" (ibid., 512).

6. *Embodiment and games*

The notion of embodiment in games is one that has received its fair share of critical attention – see, for instance, Grodal 2003; Bayliss 2007; Gee 2008; Calleja 2011 (under the term "incorporation"); and, most relevantly to our current purposes, Rune Klevjer's deployment of Merleau-Ponty's embodied phenomenology to the conceptualization of avatar-based play (2006; 2012), which I shall discuss in due time.

Let us first, however, return to the two game examples we considered earlier in this paper. In the case of "I Spy", we have already established that the target-as-game-component must be possessed of a concrete actuality and must offer some resistance to the player's project of guessing. However, consider this situation: if, after a number of fruitless guesses, the guessing player gives up, and I reveal the target to have been a coin I had been hiding in my pocket all along, I can reasonably expect to be met with protest, likely along the lines of, "But there was no way I could possibly see that!"

The import of the complaint is evident: it is part of the unspoken contract of "I Spy" as a game that the spying player chooses as the target an object which is common to her perceptual field and to that of the guessing player/s. In other words: for the game to be played, it is necessary for the community of players to acknowledge the fact that each of them exists within a bodily situation, standing before a field of perception whose shape and boundaries are determined precisely by this embodiment, and which, for the purpose of the game, becomes the field of play. In determining the nature of the target, the spying player is expected to keep in mind the bodily situation of the guessing players, given that it is only in relation to this bodily situation that a given target can offer

resistance to the project of guessing. We could express this by saying that the degree of resistance a given target presents to the project of guessing is inversely proportional to its prominence in the corporeally-determined field of the guessing player’s perception; the harder a target is for the guessing player to spot, the more resistance it offers. In the situation I have just presented, the coin in my pocket is, of course, not a part of the guessing players’ perceptual field at all, given that they lack the bodily capability to sense the contents of my pockets – as such, the resistance it offers is infinite, excluding the end of the project of guessing from ever being achieved. It is not the case, then, simply that “I Spy” structures the word-about-the-player according to the project of guessing it sets the player, but that this project is itself rendered possible, as Kockelmans writes in the passage quoted above, on the basis of the presupposition “that man’s capacity of moving his body and his ability to perceive are self-evident.”

Much the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of *Minecraft* – even if, in this case, we are dealing with a game in a virtual environment; as Gordon Calleja argues, a virtual environment can only be experienced as such if the player is granted an “extranoetic habitation” within it (2011, 29). Returning to the situation we described earlier – that of building the stronghold – it is evident that the pattern of obstacles and affordances into which the *Minecraft* landscape is resolved is determined by the nature of the embodiment the player is granted within this landscape. The stone-blocks are only revealed in their character as “standing-reserve” (Heidegger 2004[1936]), waiting to be put to use towards the end of a building project, because the player is granted the bodily capacity to quarry the stone. The player is granted enough inventory space to carry a certain number of quarried blocks in one go: this is both an affordance (in that the ability to transport blocks from place to place is what allows for the project of building the stronghold on top of the hill to be conceivable in the first place) and an obstacle (in that no more than this number of blocks can be carried in one go, thereby requiring the player to make multiple trips up and down the hill). On this latter point, the fact that climbing to the top of a hill takes more time and effort than traversing level terrain establishes a resistance to be overcome towards the end of building the hilltop stronghold which emerges entirely from the player’s bodily situation in relation to the *Minecraft* landscape.

“I can”	Affordance	Obstacle
Digging ability	Stone can become building material	Stone takes time to be quarried
Inventory space (carrying capacity)	Stone can be carried	Only a certain amount of stone can be carried

Motility	Movement in space is possible	Movement in space expends time and effort
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Fig. 1 The bodily determination of affordance and obstacle in *Minecraft*

Nor should we think about this only in terms of action, for – recalling Merleau-Ponty’s observation that the body, by virtue of extending its touch to encounter the things of the world, can itself, reciprocally, become the object of touch – the body is also *acted upon*; it exists, in one of its dimensions, as “a passive sentiment” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 133).

Klevjer observes that this is a crucial dimension of the player’s bodily engagement with the gameworld: speaking of *Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996), he writes:

If we recognize that Lara Croft is indeed an “embodiment” of the player, this would imply not only that she mediates the player’s ability to jump or walk, but also that she embodies the player’s risk of *falling down* the ravine (2012, 18).

It is this passive dimension – the status of the player’s embodied being as *patient* as well as *agent* – that reveals the final dimension of resistance that is directly constituted by the player’s incarnated being. This is the dimension of danger or threat *to* the bodily being that the player is: a creeper can only be encountered by the player as a threat on the basis of the player’s embodied being, *existing in* the *Minecraft* landscape *as* a body that can be damaged or even destroyed. Therefore, the danger that the impending night presents to the player – and the attendant imperative that the stronghold be completed before nightfall – is a direct consequence of the reciprocity of affect established thanks to the player-body’s ontological equivalence to the things-in-themselves it encounters in the gameworld, and constitutes the flipside of the player’s freedom.

7. *Player and ludic subject*

There is one question, however, that is left to be answered. It is this: what body are we talking about? The answer might seem obvious, but there are, in fact, two possibilities that we must choose between. Briefly: either we must conclude that the body in question is the player’s own, or else we must postulate something in the order of a vicarious body, a body-in-the-game that acts as the player’s body in relation to the gameworld, and which we might call the *ludic subject* – the subjective free-for-itself around which the contingency of the game is gathered in the meaningful form of a world, and for which it constitutes a factual situation.

First of all, let us note that there is clearly a difference here between the two games we have been using as an example. As a game played in physical space which, as

we have argued, is intrinsically dependent upon the player's embodied situation and the perceptual field it opens up, "I Spy" is self-evidently a game that is founded upon, and plays with, the facticity of the player's being-in-the-world. *Minecraft*, on the other hand – as a representative of the category of games in virtual environments (Aarseth, Smedstad and Sunnanå 2003) – might give us more pause for thought. While it is possible to continue to argue for the player's own bodily situation as the centre and organizing principle of the game as a factual situation for the player, it is also possible to argue instead that it is the playable figure or avatar – as the player's manifestation within the ontological domain of the virtual environment (Bayliss 2007; Mukherjee 2012) – that fulfills this role. Arguments for both framings exist within game studies and, to a considerable extent, it appears that, rather than pitching our tent in one camp or the other, it is necessary for the two arguments to be interwoven.

Let us start by returning to Leino's notion of games as "*extended facticities*" established for the benefit of the player. Working on the example of *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar Games 2008), Leino foregrounds the artifactual nature of the game object, arguing that "we could describe *GTA IV* and other similar game artefacts as extending their players' *facticities*" (2010, 218): "as *GTA IV* affords certain things while not affording others, there is a finite repertoire of things which I can choose to do [...] the artefact ultimately dictates what is possible and what is not" (ibid.).

The underlying assumption behind Leino's framing here is that "game artefacts have concrete and actual existence in the world," and that, in this sense, they "do not, by default, stand out in any particular way" (ibid., 219). The implication is that the game, as an object that is encountered within the world of the player as an in-itself, embeds itself within the player's factual situation – not, in other words, in the sense of establishing a new factual situation into which the player is able to project herself, but in the sense of extending the factual situation in which she already is by virtue of being embodied in the world. In this sense, the *origo* or starting-point of the bodily instrumental-complex whose lines of action find their terminus within the objects encountered in the game (such as the *Minecraft* stone-blocks) remains the player's own body seated on the sofa in front of the television screen, or at her desk in front of the computer. This would, of course, not erase the avatar, but it would reframe the role it plays in determining the player's phenomenal relation to the gameworld – as Klevjer writes, "in the phenomenological sense, then, the avatar should be understood as a prosthetic extension of the body-in-the-world" (2006, 93). It would not make sense to speak, in this case, of the ludic subject

as a pole of subjective experience distinct from the player, and, in fact, the concept of the ludic subject would become unnecessary at best.

However, there is a fundamental objection that needs to be put forward in relation to such a framing. The objection is an ontological one: the body that is present *in* and *to* the virtual environment – recall Merleau-Ponty’s point about the body as “a being of two leaves” – is the avatarial playable figure: the player’s own body has no ontic existence within the virtual environment, and it is only by means of a relation to the playable figure that the player can be granted the “extranoetic habitation” that Calleja grasps as being central to the player’s experience of being-in-the-virtual-environment, and to meet the contingency of the in-itself that constitutes the gameworld as, to return to Merleau-Ponty’s phrase, a “thing among things”. On the basis of this observation, other objections to the prosthetic-extensional understanding make themselves apparent: the lack of spatial contiguity between the bodily situation and the virtual environment, for instance, or the impossibility of making the instrumentality of the player’s body and that of the avatarial figure coalesce into a single, coherent unified “body schema” (Merleau-Ponty 2002[1945], 115). It seems it is, after all, necessary to speak of a ludic subject in relation to the virtual environment: a point which should, after all, already have been evident in our consideration of the way in which the bodily situation in which the player is located in relation to the *Minecraft* landscape is entirely determined by the properties of the playable figure.

Having made this observation, then, how should we frame our approach to the question of player freedom differently? The answer is that we must reconsider the “who” that the question of freedom relates to. The for-itself that encounters the components of the game and gathers them around itself in a factual situation against which it can enact its project – and, hence, play out its freedom – is not the player in her embodied existence in the actual world. Rather, it is the ludic subject, which is not to be equated either with the player in one direction, nor with the playable figure in the other: rather, it is to be understood as the existential subjectivity taken on by the player in relating to the game (and giving it the experiential form of a gameworld) through the playable figure as an embodied phenomenal standpoint.

Leino and Klevjer both anticipate a number of these observations. With reference to *Far Cry* (Crytek 2004), Leino speaks of “the unitary whole of the playing ‘I’” (2010, 227) constituted of an amalgamation of the player and the interface mechanisms of the game, including “avatars, minimaps and toolbars”. However, the

domain towards which this “playing “I”” continues to be “my facticity as extended by Far Cry” (ibid.), and the intentional structure Leino sketches out remains fundamentally one that locates its subjective and objective poles on opposite sides of the divide between the virtual environment and player’s actual situation.

Klevjer goes further in proposing an alternative understanding of the phenomenal structure established by means of the player’s engagement with the avatar. Referring to Merleau-Ponty’s framing of bodily being-in-the-world as an “I can” wielded in the direction of things-in-the-world, Klevjer writes that “the defining appeal of games like *Super Mario 64* [Nintendo 1996] or *Grand Theft Auto III* [Rockstar Games 2001] is that we get to be a different *I can*, stepping into the shoes (or wheels) of another body, in another world” (2012, 22). Crucially, then, this understanding of the ludic subject as a subjectivity that is distinct from the player’s own does not entail considering it as an Other: in the act of playing, the experience of the ludic subject is received by the player proprioceptively, that is, as *mine*; the ludic subject is essentially – and prior to the opening up of any objectifying distance – experienced as “I” while engaging with the gameworld. In a passage which deserves quoting at length, Klevjer goes a long way towards mapping out the implications that such an understanding would have upon the phenomenal nature of the player’s engagement with the gameworld.

...unlike an instrumental extension (a tool), the avatar does not expose our actual bodies to the environment; it only exposes itself, as a *vicarious* body. In contrast, a walking stick, a tennis racket or a car extends the functioning of the body directly and sets up a new bodily space which could potentially hurt it. Perceptual tools do extend and transform the ‘incarnated mind’ of the body, but they do not *themselves* mimic the position and destiny of an incarnated mind. In contrast, the avatar [...] has the capacity to project around itself its own bodily space.

Therefore, while it does mediate the agency and perceptions of the body (and as such functions as an extension), it does not subject the actual body to the aerial ecology that it mediates [...] the whole point of engaging with an avatarial extension is that it is subjected to and resides in its environment on behalf of the player. (2006, 96)

This framing might initially appear to stand in direct opposition both to the idea of games as extended facticities and to the notion of the playable figure as a prosthesis, which, as we have seen, is based on much the same underlying principle of an extension of the player’s factual situation. However, Klevjer attempts to merge the two

understandings, aiming for a dual understanding of the avatar as both *prosthetic* embodiment and as *vicarious* embodiment by means of their synthesis in the image of the “prosthetic marionette” (2012, 27).

An alternative way of framing this is to highlight the double intentional structure that emerges in the player’s relation to the game in the mode of figure-based play. The player engages with the gameworld from the perspective of the ludic subject as for-itself; at the same time, the player does not abandon her *own* factual situation outside the gameworld. From this intentional perspective, the game object appears, as Leino observes, in its artifactual nature, as in-itself – and, crucially, this includes the playable figure and, by extension, the ludic subject.

In conclusion, then, what this paper has highlighted is, firstly, that player freedom – and the nature of the free-for-itself that its practice brings into being – is determined by the ludic subject that emerges as a for-itself in relation to the gameworld, and which the player takes on as “I” in engaging with the game. In reflecting the phenomenological structure of embodiment, the ludic subject has a two-sided character: as in-itself, insofar as, in the form of the playable figure, it represents part of the facticity encountered by the player, and also as for-itself, shaping around it the gameworld as a factual situation in the player’s experience.

Secondly, thanks to the double intentional structure of figure-based play, the player, retaining her own embodied subject-position *as* a player outside the gameworld, gathers in, as part of her own factual situation, not only the gameworld as an artifact, but also, as an intrinsic part of this artifact, the ludic subject at its centre. Thus, as a player, not only do I, as Klevjer writes, “get to be a different *I can*,” but, at the same time, I am also able to obtain an objective perspective upon the ludic subject, the free-for-itself which *I am* in relation to the gameworld. *I am* the ludic subject – its project of freedom, and, hence, the constitution of its being as for-itself, I experience proprioceptively – while also grasping it across a distance as an in-itself, in the same way an observer would: it is this which constitutes the unique aesthetic character of figure-based play in virtual environments.

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