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### Virtual Realism: Player, Perception and Action in Video Game Play

The desire to experience a world different from the mundane workings of everyday life has been a human trait since the beginning of recorded memory. We have told each other stories, sung songs and created images, all representing other places more interesting, more wonderful, more frightening than the ones we live in. Yet alongside the stories, the pictures and the songs has lived a specific desire that we should be able to *inhabit* these worlds. That they should not be mere ideas, representations, but real, tangible places.

This difference between representation and reality may provide an angle to explore the ongoing debate with regard to video games as potentially expressive, story-driven media objects. In this paper, I will be discussing the question of realism in video games through a consideration of the player's experience of gameplay. I draw upon two comparable ideas: Chris Crawford's quote that games represent a "subset of reality"<sup>1</sup>, and Jesper Juul's contention that games are "half-real".<sup>2</sup> 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"<sup>3</sup>, where "objective accuracy is only necessary to the extent required to support the player's fantasy"<sup>4</sup>. Crawford thus considers the formal system of the game as the basis from

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<sup>1</sup> Crawford, C, *The Art of Computer Game Design*, chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Juul, J, *Half-Real, video games between real rules and fictional worlds*.

<sup>3</sup> Crawford, C, *The Art of Computer Game Design*, chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

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, while the imaginary is contained within the game's plot.<sup>5</sup> Although I agree with both scholars with regards to the status of video games as bridging between the imaginary and the real, I reach this conclusion by a different route. Through a consideration of the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger, especially their notion of tool use, I explore how this idea of half-reality may be considered from the point of view of the physical reality of the player, and how this may implicate the question of realism in video games. I argue that this has consequences in terms of how we may interpret video games, and using a brief example I suggest that considering the idea of realism may offer insight into the potentiality of games as expressive media.

Throughout human history we find examples of attempts to trick our senses into telling us we have entered a different world. Oliver Grau begins his study of virtual art with the now famous panorama frescoes dug out in the ruins of Pompeii, where the viewer would stand in the middle of a circular room and be surrounded by a continuous scene wherever he turned his eyes.<sup>6</sup> Another, somewhat less highbrow, example is of the notorious experiments with Smell-o-Vision cinema in the 1960's, where viewers were treated to different scents excreting from the back of their seats, in order to smell the scenarios being displayed on the screen. From the point of view of video games, the rumble pack is a popular, yet curiously overlooked in serious studies, example of the endeavour to make the player *feel* the world of the game.

As we have entered into the "information age", obtaining knowledge, experience and communication by the means of technology is increasingly becoming the norm. Yet with this has also come a renewed focus on philosophical questions with regards to our perception of reality. As Hubert Dreyfus has noted, just as philosophers are coming to see the Cartesian ontology as mistaken and the epistemological problems it posed as pseudo-problems, new technology is reviving the original mind/body divide. Uncritical reflections on cyberspace as a distinct space separate from the physical, i.e. "real" world

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<sup>5</sup> Juul, J, *Half-Real, video games between real rules and fictional worlds*.

<sup>6</sup> Grau, O, *Virtual Art, from Illusion to Immersion*, chapter 2.

can be found throughout the social spectre. Famous theorists like Howard Rheingold<sup>7</sup> and Marvin Minsky celebrate the virtual as a space where we can leave our old selves behind and form new identities, new communities and bonds, in Minsky's case taking it all the way to speculations about the possibility of mind upload in a not-too-distant future.<sup>8</sup> With regards to video games, this has resulted in a troubling situation in which games are too frequently considered within the sphere of utopian or dystopian thinking, either as spaces where a player can be anything, do anything, and generally play God, or as a dangerous and soul destroying activity that is teaching children to become killing machines.

Yet with the increasing focus on cyberspace and cybertheory has also come a renewed interest in existential phenomenology, and especially in 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. But the desire to inhabit other worlds has always revolved around the body. Too often we think of the world in Cartesian terms, yet if our minds were truly free to wander into whichever world they pleased, we would not have created the Pompeii frescoes, the Smell-o-Vision, or the rumble pack. 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 reality is not tied to the perceptive process, by which I mean the passive reception of visual stimuli, but to the enactive process, to movement and bodily sensation.

Two specific terms, sometimes used interchangeably can be used to illuminate this idea, namely telepresence and virtual reality. Some may argue that virtual reality is still merely an idea dreamt up by cyberpunk authors, and that the current VR offerings, be it the headgear and glove or the CAVE environment, are vastly inferior to the original dream. The term has nevertheless permeated mainstream culture to such an extent that it merits consideration. Media artist Eduardo Kac provides a useful distinction between the

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<sup>7</sup> See Rheingold, H, *The Virtual Community* (1994).

<sup>8</sup> Mind upload denotes the hypothetical transfer of a human mind to an artificial substrate. Minsky, as well as Hans Moravec and Ray Kurzweil have openly speculated about the possibility and desirability of this. There exist no current technologies for making it a possibility.

two terms.<sup>9</sup> 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. 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 remote user to perform a physical action and see the results. The difference, again, is between the imaginary and the tangible. If we use Kac's distinctions, we can argue that virtual reality is a representation of an idea, while telepresence allows for remote access to physical reality. To return to the question of the video game experience, it is my contention that video games connect the two terms. On the one hand they are autonomous, closed systems, designed worlds that do not refer to a reality outside of themselves. Whether games can be described as mere concepts like *Tetris*, simulations like *the Sims*, plots like *Grand Theft Auto*, or narratives like *the Legend of Zelda*, games are closed systems without any correspondence to remote physical reality. Yet they allow for a player to perform physical actions and see the results. This is the basic prerequisite of interactivity, and the half-reality of games can thus be defined by the interaction between a real body and an imaginary 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 theory of the ready-to-hand and Merleau-Ponty's description of tool use. In his famous 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.<sup>10</sup> 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

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<sup>9</sup> Kac, E, *Aspects of the Aesthetics of Telecommunications*.

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, M, *Being and Time*

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.<sup>11</sup> Anyone who has ever played a video game will know that the process of transforming the joypad 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, it is no longer viable to claim that games are representations of the world, or of *a* world. Instead, 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, when 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.”<sup>12</sup>

Due to both presenting themselves as moving images on a screen interface, video games have traditionally lent themselves easily to comparisons with 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

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<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty, M, *The Phenomenology of Perception*

<sup>12</sup> Aarseth, E, *Genre Trouble*.

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 games are considered purely from the point of the imaginary, as closed systems, the continued focus on cinematic realism is understandable. However, if we consider games from the point of view of the body, of physical action, the gameplay experience becomes the antithesis of the cinema experience, in which everything is done in order to forget the body. The cinema experience is defined by darkness, immobility and silence, and the film is an autonomous object in itself. The gameplay experience, on the other hand, is entirely reliant on the physically active player.

Alexander Galloway, in his recent book *Gaming*, 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 argues from the point of view of realism as defined 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. 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* can not be described as realism, 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 gameplay 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 that will know the situations and experiences represented.<sup>13</sup> But although he acknowledges physical action on behalf of the player, Galloway's notion of realism is still tied up with the idea of graphic representation. He presupposes the need for representative depictions and mimetic imagery for a game to be deemed realism. 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.

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<sup>13</sup> Galloway, A, *Gaming, essays on algorithmic culture*, chapter 3

To conclude with a brief example of how this can be used to interpret games, an instance of a game that knowingly uses player action in order to express a specific idea is Gonzalo Frasca's political minigame *September 12<sup>th</sup>*, a rather simple Flash game available freely online. The player is asked to bomb a Baghdad market, attempting to hit the terrorists roaming among the other normal people. The graphics are rendered in a simple, cartoon-like style. The controls, however, are slightly skewed, making it impossible to ever hit the target properly. No matter how vigorously one tries, it is impossible not to hit civilians alongside terrorists. And much grief ensues. Through very simple manipulation of the player's actions, and their expected results, *September 12<sup>th</sup>* is an example of symbolic expression created by the means of subverting traditional and established norms and expectations.

A phenomenological reading of player experience can thus show how realism in games, and subsequent interpretation of expressive potential must always begin from the point that a player protagonist drives the game through physical action. Video games cannot be mimetic representations of the world from the vantage point of cinema, because of the role of the player. Gamic realism, then, is always subjective, and reliant not on depiction but on action. If my actions render the expected result, the game can be described as realistic. The world on the screen in front of me is imaginary, yet my actions within it are real.

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