

The Character of the Ludic Muse

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In an essay which takes the question itself as its title, Jean-Luc Nancy asks, “Why Are There Several Arts And Not Just One?” (1996). The question, Nancy writes, finds its roots in what appears to be an irresolvable “tension between two concepts of art, one technical and the other sublime” (ibid., 4). On the one hand, we find the idea of an “essence of art” (ibid., 3), as a transcendental Idea that cannot be reduced to any given manifestation in this or that object or activity – this is what Nancy refers to as the “sublime” concept of art. On the other hand, we never encounter ‘art’ in this transcendental sense – instead, we encounter the immanence of this idea in an example of painting, or music, or poetry, or another of the specific technical practices collected under the label of “the arts.”

This plurality in singularity – multiple arts gathered under the essence of art – is fundamental to our concept of art, and is not the result of the fragmentation of an initial unity. As Nancy writes, referring to the figures of the Muses in classical mythology that represented the spirit of creative production, “the Muses will always have been several” (ibid., 1) – art has always been a force that manifests itself across divergent forms, each with its own respective spirit.

Any inquiry into the nature of art, then, must be two-sided. On the one hand, we must ask what art, in the singular, *is*: what is this essence of which all the arts partake, each in their own way? On the other hand, this must be combined with an investigation of how this “force” – to use Nancy’s term – is always crystallized within a specific form, resulting from a specific technical practice. In other words, understanding an art form – or a given art work as a specific instance of an art form – involves, first of all, understanding how that art form gives its own particular form to the force that is referred to in the transcendental Idea of art; which, of course, is inseparable from an understanding of what this force consists of in its essence.

To use Nancy’s phrasing, then, what is the spirit that each of the Muses presides over? The ancient Greeks personified the spirits of the respective arts in the figures of a lyric Muse, a Muse for dance, a tragic Muse – and, after centuries of philosophy and criticism, we know enough about each of these to be able to speak, with some confidence, of what a lyrical poem *is*, what a dance *is*, what a tragedy *is*, as an art work. The question, however, re-emerges at the point at which we introduce a new technical practice – and, hence, a new form – to the pantheon of the Muses. Put directly, if we want to consider games under the label of art, we must answer the question: what is the character of the ludic Muse?

According to the dual logic outlined above, answering this question requires us to do two things. First, the question can only be answered on the basis of a conceptualization of what art signifies in what Nancy terms its sublime sense, which extends beyond any of its concrete manifestations. It is on this basis that we can then

launch an investigation into the specific form which the ludic art gives to this force, thereby giving rise to a new aesthetic potential – a new spirit.

Art, materiality and form

Before looking at Nancy's approach to this question of the singular-plurality of art and the arts – and before then moving on to the specific character of a ludic art – we would do well to found the argument in a brief *précis* of the relevant aspects of the understanding of aesthetics which stands in the background to Nancy's investigation.

In the aesthetic tradition that has emerged in the wake of Kant, the aesthetic object is that which, because it does not disappear against the horizon of a clear purpose or a fixed meaning, foregrounds its own appearance (Kant 2007[[1790], 28, §2). As Gérard Genette has argued, this self-foregrounding of the aesthetic object – which can be understood as the crux of its aesthetic function – has two aspects. What is foregrounded is, firstly, the immanence of the aesthetic work in a material “extrafunctional invariant” (1997, 8): “the *Venus of Milo*, for example, consists of a block of white marble of such and such a form, which may currently be viewed, on a sunny day, in the Louvre” (ibid., 9).

Of course, different art forms operate according to different regimes of immanence: the immanence of the *Venus of Milo* in its mass of marble is of a different kind than the immanence of *Ulysses* in an infinitely replicable sequence of verbal signs. Nonetheless, the principle is the same: the moment of aesthetic experience is based upon the encounter with a material thing-in-itself.

Interestingly, Genette does consider games under his taxonomy of artworks, albeit only in passing. His discussion of games is placed within his consideration of artworks – such as certain categories of dance or jazz music – realized through a performance with an improvisational character. Genette describes an improvisation as a play within the confines of, and upon the elements that constitute, a fixed structure – as such:

...a tennis player's or chess player's moves are determined, however “unprecedented” each stage of a match may be, by the tactics the situation imposes, and, simultaneously, the repertory of decisions (*serving, going to net, lobbing, bringing out one's knight, casting, sacrificing a pawn, etc.*) that knowledge of the rules and experience of the game authorize and suggest. (ibid., 58-59)

What Genette considers as an aesthetic object, then, is not the game of tennis or chess itself, but a *particular* game of tennis or chess – say, Nadal against Federer at the 2008 Wimbledon finals. It is, in other words, a performance. By this understanding, the extrafunctional invariant of a game – the material in which it is immanent – is the sequence of actions constituting this performance, improvised within the structures established by the game's rules – “an (autographic) physical act whose material features cannot all be noted” (ibid., 61).

In this foregrounding of the status of a game as a set of actions, Genette anticipates similar approaches in the field of game studies. Alexander Galloway has argued that “with video games, the work itself is material action” (2006, 2). In arguably the most engaged application of philosophical aesthetics to the study of games to date, Graeme

Kirkpatrick has similarly argued that, in aesthetic terms, videogames should be understood as an “embodied practice” (2011, 120) – even claiming, in an analogy that makes explicit the parallel to Genette’s approach, that, in their status as bodily actions, “video games are a form of dance” (ibid., 122).

However, the focus on the immanence of the aesthetic object in its material invariant is only half the story – as Genette notes, the work of art only achieves its aesthetic unfolding when this material in which it is immanent is transcended in its transformation into an aesthetic object. In the Kantian tradition, this transformation involves the foregrounding of the formal unity that the object takes as a distinct figure of consciousness. Kant writes that “the consciousness of the mere formal purposiveness [...] in a representation through which an object is given, is the pleasure itself” (2007[1790], 42, §12). ‘Form’ is understood less as referring to the art object’s material dimension, and more as describing the structures of experience relating to it. The form of an artwork, in this context, is understood in specifically spatiotemporal terms – that is, the artwork, in its phenomenal appearance as an aesthetic object, takes on a particular shape as a distribution of sensible experience across spatial and temporal dimensions (ibid., 45, §14).

The difference between the arts, then, can be attributed to their different capacities for spatiotemporal experiential forms. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s influential *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1914[1853]) is typical of art criticism informed by philosophical aesthetics, in that its approach is founded upon an understanding of different art forms as constituting different structures of experience. Offering a comparative consideration of the arts of painting and poetry, for instance, Lessing argues that “their imitations make use of entirely different means and symbols – [painting] of form and colour in space, [poetry] of articulated sounds in time” (ibid., 91), and that, as a result, they mobilize different structures of experience.

Kirkpatrick operates with precisely such an understanding of aesthetic form, arguing that the key to understanding games as aesthetic objects is to consider them as “shapes and patterns in the experiential order” (2011, 14). Here, Kirkpatrick is writing in the shadow of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who characterized as a patterned movement – as with Genette and Kirkpatrick, the emphasis here is on embodied action – constituting a “self-presentation” (1989[1960], 108).

At this point, however, an engaged study of the aesthetics of the ludic form must diverge from Genette’s and Gadamer’s admittedly tangential forays into the field. The main difficulty that needs to be addressed is that, in different ways, both Genette and Gadamer frame the ludic aesthetic object not from the standpoint of the player, but from that of the spectator. For Genette, a game constitutes an aesthetic object as an observed performance, in the same category as an improvised jazz or dance performance. In Gadamer’s aesthetics, this is rendered even more explicit. The presentational force of play finds its apotheosis in the “transformation into structure” represented by the art work, in which the act of playing recedes in order to foreground the “pure appearance” of that which is presented (ibid., 111).

Contrary to this approach, it is vital to articulate an aesthetics of the ludic form that describes the formal – that is, experiential – character of “the game as played, as referring to the object of study for game studies from the player’s perspective” (Leino 2010, 6). The implied audience of an improvisational dance piece or jazz performance

stands in a relation, not to the performative act, but to the result of it. With games, it is the player herself who is the recipient of the aesthetic experience. This already implies an important insight into the nature of games as aesthetic objects: namely, that it is not the experience of perceiving a performance, but the experience of performing the act, that is what matters – and, therefore, that it is not the result of the performance that is the object to be grasped aesthetically (the experienced movement of the dance), but the act *itself*, in its intrinsic value (the experience of *performing* the movement).

Art as the bringing-forth of ‘world’

Having thus framed the aesthetic object as a material invariant that is concretized, in its reception, as an experiential form, it remains to be asked what it is that this form brings into presentation. To put the question differently: what is it that the form of the aesthetic object brings into view?

It is at this point that Nancy enters into dialogue with the aesthetic tradition in order to broach the question of the nature of art in the general sense. The theoretical framework within which Nancy approaches the broad question of the meaning of art – and, subsequently, of its various manifestations across the technical practices of the arts – is that of the phenomenological tradition. In particular, Nancy’s answer rests on an implicit debt to one of the central insights articulated in Martin Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art” (2004[1936]). The assertion of Heidegger’s which is relevant here is the idea that “to be a work [in the sense of a work of art] means to set up a world” (ibid., 170).

What Heidegger means by ‘world’ in this context requires some explanation, and is best understood with reference to his development of the concept in his earlier *Being and Time*. Here, ‘world’ is understood as a basic complement to human Being or *Dasein*, which, itself, is understood precisely as *being-in-the-world*. As such, ‘world’ is not simply what he calls “an ontical concept” referring to the set of entities encountered “within-the-world,” those entities “which *Dasein* is essentially *not*” (2008[1927], 92-93 [64]). That is, it is not the world *out there* which, as a subject, I encounter as separate from me. On the contrary, it is “that ‘*wherein*’ a factual *Dasein* as such can be said to live” (ibid., 93[65]). It is the ordered existential sphere of *Dasein*’s being, an arrangement of the sensible and an attendant mode of being-in that unfolds as a network of existential practices.

Crucially, Heidegger – and, in his wake, Nancy – argue that though the world, in this sense, is that in which we always already are, as beings-in-the-world, it is – perhaps for that very reason – not available to our conscious perception. As a complement to our being, the world does not stand against us as an object of perception. It is against this observation that Heidegger argues that it is in the work of art that the world – and being-in-the-world – can “attain to unconcealment” (2004[1936], 181), be brought forth into the realm of the sensible.

To quote Heidegger’s own example, Van Gogh’s painting of a pair of well-worn boots (*Les Soulières* (1887)) invokes the world of the peasant who wears them – the image contains within it, Heidegger writes:

...the toilsome tread of the worker [...] the dampness and richness of the soil
[...] the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its
unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field [...]

uncomplaining worry as to the certainty of bread, the trembling before the impending childbed and shivering at the surrounding menace of death. (ibid., 159)

In short, the painting brings forth the world within which the peasant that Heidegger conjures out of his imagination has her existence, and within which the boots are grasped as equipment forming part of the network of practices that make up the form of the world.

The work of art, then, is to bring forth into unconcealment the world within which it is produced: it is with an echo of this that Nancy says that “art is there every time to open the world, to open the world to itself” (2010, 97).

An important point needs to be emphasized here: since ‘world’, in this phenomenological sense, is the world as it extends for the human being or *Dasein* that itself exists only as a being-in that world, it is impossible to separate an investigation into the world from an investigation into that being for whom it is constituted as a world. As a result, for Heidegger, the fundamental inquiry into the nature of our being as being-in-the-world is made up of three inextricable analyses. Firstly, in his words, it is important to investigate “the ontological structure of the ‘world’ and [...] the idea of *worldhood* as such” (2008[1927], 78[53]). Secondly, in relation to this world, we must theorize “that *entity* which in every case has Being-in-the-world as the way in which it is” (ibid.). Thirdly, it is crucial to investigate the relation of “*Being-in [In-sein]* as such” which brings the two poles together. As Heidegger writes, “emphasis upon any one of these constitutive items signifies that the others are emphasized along with it; this means that in any such case the whole phenomenon gets seen” (ibid., 79[53]).

In other words, individual being and world are bound up as two sides of the same coin. The individual is here understood as the subject *to whom* this particular sensibility is given – in fact, as the subject who gathers this sphere of the sensible into an ordered unity. At the same time, the inverse is also true – just as it is in subjective being that the world is gathered up *as* a world, it is also against the world that the individual can unfold her being as a being-in-the-world.

To return this analysis to the domain of art, then, it becomes clear that if the artwork presents a world – as a phenomenological domain of lived experience – what it brings into view is also a being-in-the-world, and, hence, also, the mode of being which gathers that world around itself. As Nancy writes, what art offers is “a certain perception of self in the world. The man of Lascaux presents himself to himself, he presents to his contemporaries the form of their world, Giotto presents himself and presents to his contemporaries a form of the world” (2010, 92).

The subject of art

This constitutes Nancy’s answer to the first part of the question regarding the nature of art. However, if we were to stop at the insight that the force of art, in its general, transcendent sense, is that of bringing-forth a being-in-the-world into the exteriority of a material object (or, more accurately, the experience of a material object), we would have no basis upon which to investigate the specificity of different art forms – or, in Nancy’s terms, the way in which the singularity of the force of art is necessarily distributed across the multiple characters of the Muses.

At this stage, then, Nancy, whose interest in aesthetic form goes beyond Heidegger's primarily existential concerns, reframes the Heideggerean discourse on being-in-the-world within the domain of formalist Kantian aesthetics. The import of Nancy's move is best understood in the light of a particular tradition in philosophical aesthetics. I have already noted that, for Kant, the one of the key characteristics of the aesthetic judgment is the fact that, the object being encountered without the cognition of an apparent purpose or function, it is encountered in a relation of disinterested contemplation. As he writes, in the moment of aesthetic judgment, "we do not want to know whether anything depends or can depend on the existence of the thing either for myself or for anyone else" (2007[[1790], 28, §2).

To draw a link to Heidegger, the aesthetic object is encountered as being *present-at-hand* rather than *ready-to-hand* (2008[1927], 101[71]), which is the primordial manner in which things exist within Dasein's existential lived-world. As in Heidegger's famous example, we do not notice the hammer itself when we are using it to drive a nail into a wall (*ibid.*, 98[69]). The thing itself fades away: we see through it, towards the existential practice it facilitates and the end towards which it is put. For Kant, the aesthetic encounter provides an instance in which this teleological drive towards final purposes is interrupted – this is what allows the form of the object to be appreciated for its own sake.

Later developments in aesthetics have taken up Kant's lead in this regard. Arthur Schopenhauer, in particular, gave this character of the aesthetic function even greater prominence. Cognition, in Schopenhauer's system, "is a function of the will" (1987[1818], 262), with the latter understood as the relentless forward drive of desire that is the fundamental aspect of human existence. The aesthetic encounter, however, becomes the means of momentarily arresting the restless, inherently unsatisfied striving of the will, providing an instance of cognition "which no longer follows relations [of perceived objects], but rests in secure contemplation of the presented object removed from all context" (*ibid.*, 264).

If being-in-the-world is understood as a network of existential practices geared towards the unfolding of our projects – teleologically oriented towards goals and final purposes – then the things of the world, being encountered in their readiness-to-hand, disappear as means towards ends. In this context, aesthetic experience – in the understanding implicit in Kant and explicit in Schopenhauer – represents a moment of experience that is isolated from this network of teleological purposiveness: experience for its own sake, which foregrounds itself as experience.

Nancy, however, takes this insight a step further. Put simply, the argument he sets forth is that it is not only the experience of the aesthetic object which, in being isolated in aesthetic contemplation, is being brought forth into consciousness as a foregrounded presence-at-hand, but also *the experiencing itself*. In other words, what art brings into presentation is not simply the *sensed*, but the *sensing*, as a mode of being-in-the-world. As Nancy writes, art "looks, it has regard for our look [*regard*], it looks at it and causes it to come about as look" (1996, 20).

The plurality of the arts, then, is due to the fact that aesthetic practice "breaks down the living unity of perception or action" (*ibid.*, 21), parceling out the distribution of the sensible which constitutes the cognition of our experiential being-in-the-world

into discrete units that, in being detached from the purpose-driven instrumental complex of existential praxis, emerge in their presence-at-hand. Each art form, then:

...isolates what we call a “sense,” or a part or feature of this sense; it isolates it so as to force it to be only what it is outside of signifying and useful perception. Art forces a sense to touch itself, to be this sense that it is. (ibid.)

In so doing, however, the sense itself is not isolated as an abstracted fragment. Recall that, for Kant, the aesthetic object retains the “form of purposiveness,” and gains its power precisely through its presentation of a formal unity that stands outside the fixed structures of purposive, fixed conceptuality. For Nancy, the same is the case, not on the side of the experienced object, but the experiencing being. In detaching an aspect of our phenomenal cognition from the lived unity of being-in-the-world, this aspect of ourselves as experiencing beings emerges into presence-at-hand in the form of its own unity.

...by leaving behind the integration of the “lived,” it also becomes something else, another instance of unity, which exposes another world, not a “visual” or “sonorous” world but a “pictorial” or “musical” one [...] this is the force of the Muses: it is at once a force of separation, isolation, intensification, and metamorphosis. Out of something that was part of a unity of signification and representation, it makes something else, which is not a detached part but the touch of another unity. (ibid., 21-22)

To put it a different way – by this understanding, in front of an aesthetic object, the recipient, in adopting the attendant aesthetic attitude, becomes an aesthetic subject, and it is upon the form of this subjectivity as much as upon the form of the object it frames that the aesthetic effect rests. To take an example: painting makes of the viewer a pictorial-subject, engaging in a form of being-in-the-world that can be termed the “pictorial” (ibid., 21) – bringing forth a particular sensible configuration of the world *as* world, as a distribution of the sensible. In front of a painting, we comport ourselves in the manner the painting expects of us: we stand at the right distance, we let our gaze move between its elements, we step back and subsume these elements into an ordered unity according to the rules and conventions of pictorial art, applying concepts such as ‘composition,’ ‘symmetry,’ ‘colour,’ ‘line’ and ‘form’ in order to do so. In doing so – in engaging in a pictorial mode of being-in-the-world – the painting is gathered into the form of an experiential unity, that is, into a pictorial world.

Aesthetics and play

Before proceeding with the argument, it bears remarking that the idea of the aesthetic relation as involving a disinterested detachment from the instrumental practices of being-in-the-world maps directly onto classic theories of the nature of play, suggesting a close relation between play and the aesthetic attitude. Johan Huizinga characterized play as an activity which serves no purpose outside itself, which is its own justification (1950, 8). Even more forcefully – and bearing more than an echo of Schopenhauer – Eugen Fink figures play as a self-reflexive phenomenal structure defined primarily by its capacity to bring *itself* into view, rather than any final purpose it opens onto. This is achieved through a contextualization of play within an existential understanding of human being as fundamentally forward-looking and future-oriented:

We know ourselves to be “on the way.” We are always torn away from and driven beyond [*weg- und vorwärtsgerissen*] each present moment by the force with which we project our life onto the proper and successful existence [...] We are entranced [*hingerissen*] by the urge to complete and fulfill our fragmentary being. We live in the prospect of the future. We conceive the present as a preparation, as a station along the way, as a way of passage. (2012[1958], I)

Against this context, play is understood as the phenomenal mechanism which allows us to momentarily step out of this purposive future-orientation and, in bringing itself into view for its own sake, can serve as the vehicle by which the structures of existence can be represented to perception:

Play is a fundamental phenomenon of existence, just as original and independent as death, love, work and mastery, but it is *not* directed, as with the other fundamental phenomena, by a collective striving after the final purpose. It stands *over and against them*, as it were, in order to assimilate them into itself by portraying them. (ibid.)

Play stands for the existential phenomena that constitute human being-in-the-world, modeling and thereby presenting them. In other words, “play is a specific way of engaging with Being or with one’s existence, since it makes some essential laws and structures of Being experienceable” (Möring 2013, 118).

Fink’s existential framing of play, then, bears fundamental parallels to Nancy’s conceptualization of art. It is on the basis of this parallel between the domain of play and that of art that the justification can be established for considering games under the auspices of the conceptuality of aesthetics outlined in this paper.

The presentation of action

Against the background of Nancy’s phenomenological aesthetics of art and the arts, it is now possible to more rigorously tackle the question this paper set itself: that of the character of the ludic Muse. To put the question more directly: if painting, to use Nancy’s example, allows us to experience our own seeing, by engaging us as subjects defined through a pictorial mode of being towards a pictorial world, what facet of our being-in-the-world do games bring forward into conscious perception in making us *ludic subjects*?

The answer is already apparent when we return to the insight gained at the earlier stage in the paper – namely, that if a material invariant can be identified for games as aesthetic objects, it is the set of actions in which the playing of a game unfolds, as experienced not by a detached spectator but by the player in the act of playing. Upon this insight, following the same logic by which Nancy argues that the form of painting isolates the visual zone of our distribution of the sensible, we would reach the conclusion that what ludic form isolates is *action* – it makes of our own actions, as players, an aesthetic object. That action is as fundamental an aspect of the sensible unity of the world as experience is undeniable – as Maurice Merleau-Ponty has argued, “the plunge into action is, from the subject’s point of view, an original way of relating himself to the object, and is on the same footing as perception” (2002[1945], 127). The ludic art, then, in isolating the zone of action from the unity of being-in-the-world, *presents* our own acting to us, and makes it visible.

Two points, however, need to be addressed before a clear view of the character of a ludic art can be gained. First of all, it is necessary to specify in what way the actions the player performs in the game come to be separated from the lived unity of her existential praxis of being-in-the-world, thereby allowing these actions to be brought forth into conscious presentation – that is, to come into view as aesthetic actions. Secondly, it must be determined how the set of actions performed in the act of playing a game can be organized into the coherent formal unity of the distinct aesthetic figure.

To answer the first question, we might be tempted to argue that ludic actions gain their aesthetic disinterestedness – and, hence, their isolation from the lived unity of existential praxis – through being performed for their own sake, with no extrinsic purpose. Such an understanding would align the aesthetics of game play with what Merleau-Ponty terms the *abstract* bodily movement, which is not oriented towards an end in the world – a purpose having its terminus in an object towards which the gesture is oriented – but, rather, is focused on itself. It is not only the purposive nature of concrete action that is absent from the abstract movement, but also its transitive vector in the direction of an object in the world. In an abstract act, “my body, which a moment ago was the vehicle of the movement, now becomes its end; its motor project is no longer directed towards something in the world” (ibid.), but, reflexively, towards the active parts of my body, “making an object of it instead of going through it to link up with things by means of it” (ibid., 139).

This understanding of what the notion of aesthetic action might imply is a good fit for conceptualizing the nature of an activity such as dance as it is experienced by the dancer – more broadly, its range of application would seem to overlap with the category of activities Roger Caillois identifies under the label of *ilinx*-play, which invoke the pure pleasure of movement and bodily action (2001[1958], 23). However, this is not an adequate description of ludic actions, which do in fact have a focus and a terminus in an object and a state of affairs external to the agent. The swing of a racket in the game of tennis Genette speaks of differs from the extension of the arm in a dance, in that the former is performed with the purpose of striking the ball and, by doing so, returning a serve. The same is just as clearly true of, say, mining a seam of coal in *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011) – an action performed upon an object external to the player (the seam of coal) with the express purpose of increasing the stock of coal in the player’s inventory, which she might intend to put to use in order to create torches to use in her subterranean explorations.

It is with this in mind that Gadamer writes that “every game presents the man who plays it with a task” (1989[1960], 107): for example, the golfer must get the ball into the hole, and all her actions during a game of golf are performed with this goal in mind. Moreover, the actions a player performs while playing a game are determined by her encounter with a set of concrete existents defined by the game itself: the tennis player’s swing is a response to the trajectory of the ball as a concrete, material object, and its equally concrete result will be either a successful or a failed attempt at changing the ball’s trajectory. As Fink writes, “playing is always a confrontation with beings” (2012[1958], II). This concrete contingency of the player’s ludic actions is what Olli Tapio Leino has termed the “gameplay condition” (2010, 218), to which he assigns it a central role within his phenomenology of ludic engagement.

None of this changes the fact that, as Gadamer notes, it is the play-act itself, and not the completion of the task or the concrete results of the player’s actions, that is the

vehicle for the “self-presentation” of play (1989[1960], 108). Golf is not about placing a ball in a hole, but about how the golfer’s orientation towards this task gives purpose and structure to her traversal of the golf course. It is, Gadamer insists, as a “comportment” (ibid., 107) that play is to be understood in its aesthetic character. Nonetheless, this comportment is inherently shaped by the player’s orientation towards the tasks set by the game. The purposiveness of the player’s ludic actions, and their determination by the material objects they address, are inherent dimensions of what is brought into aesthetic presentation in the ludic work.

Game as practice

A way of bringing this all together is to argue that what is isolated in the ludic work is not a set of objectless, purposeless actions, but the unity of a practice. Again, this is a point which warrants explanation. A practice, as Paul Ricoeur defines it, building on the action theory of Georg Henrik von Wright (1971), is a relation between a teleology and a systemic ontology that gives rise to action-chains bearing a “unity of configuration,” being largely defined through a “vocabulary attaching to our repertoire of powers” (Ricoeur 1992, 153-154). The practice of farming (to give Ricoeur’s own example) can be understood as a relation between a system comprising soil, crops, the sun and the rain, farming equipment *et cetera*, and a teleological orientation towards the production of food, which resolves itself as a vocabulary of possible actions such as *plowing, sowing, harvesting, watering* and so on.

We have already noted that these two elements of a practice – a systemic ontology of things towards which its actions are directed, and a related teleology governing these actions – are both present and accounted for in games. The ontological understanding of games as systems of interrelated components forming a complex whole (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 50) is one that has proven influential within game studies, and the notion of goal-orientation – or, at the very least, of favourable and less favourable outcomes – is one of the constitutive elements of a number of the most influential theorizations of the concept of ‘game’ (cf. Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971, 7; Suits 1990[1978], 34; Costikyan 2002, 11-14; Juul 2005, 36).

Moreover, the way in which these two elements of a practice coalesce, from the perspective of the individual engaging in the practice, into a range of possible actions has also been anticipated in existing theoretical approaches to games. Genette’s consideration of the aesthetic nature of games, discussed above, foregrounds the importance of “the repertory of decisions [...] that knowledge of the rules and experience of the game authorize and suggest” (1997, 59). Within game studies, Chris Crawford has written about the usefulness of understanding games in terms of the vocabulary of actions they allow the player (2004, 228-229), while, drawing on Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological conceptualization of consciousness as being defined through the “I can” it can extend towards its world, that is, through the possibilities for action determining its being (2002[1945], 160), Rune Klevjer has argued that the primary appeal of games is that “we get to be a different *I can*” (2012, 22), subjectively defined through the actions we are allowed within the world of the game.

The gameworld and the ludic subject

The insight Klevjer arrives at on the foundation of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is vital, and paves the way for this paper to draw its argument full circle, returning,

bearing these insights regarding the existential character of games and play, to Nancy's discourse on the force of art and its divergent manifestations in the forms of the arts.

Klevjer's approach brings the discourse of the practice and its associated vocabulary of actions back into the phenomenology of being-in-the-world. The notion of the 'I can' formalizes an understanding of subjectivity – and of the sensible organization in which the world is given for that subjectivity – as being determined by the lines of action extending outwards from the subject's standpoint: "there is a world for a subject just insofar as the body has capacities by which it can approach, grasp, and appropriate its surroundings in the direction of its intentions" (Young 1980, 145).

All of the elements that are at play in the practice constituted by the player's ludic actions – the concrete, material existents of the game system, the player's orientation towards the goals set by the game, the resulting set of possible actions coalescing into a subjective 'I can,' and the related organization of the game system into a sphere of existential praxis – come together in the notion of the *gameworld*, and, relatedly, of the player as a *ludic subject* occupying a phenomenal standpoint within the gameworld.

The idea of a gameworld can be traced back to Fink, for whom the ontology of play is founded upon its establishment of a *play-world*: "play is creative bringing-forth [...] the product is the play-world" (2012[1958], III). Here, "play-world" refers to the ontological domain of things as defined by the meanings given to them by the frame of play. Fink's account uses the example of a wooden doll as a plaything: the doll "is a piece of material and wire or an artificial mass [...] but, seen from the perspective of a playing girl, a doll is a *child*, and the girl is its *mother*" (ibid., II).

In this case, the play-world is the world in which the child that the doll stands for is actual. It is in relation to these things that ludic actions are significant. Moreover, just as the plaything is granted its significance in the play-world, so does the player herself become a being of different significance – a member of the play-world, determined by the logic of its frame, or, to retain the terminology used so far, a ludic subject.

Fink here builds on the recurring trope of the realm of play as a 'world apart' – antecedents can be traced from Huizinga's notion of the *magic circle* as referring to the "temporary world circumscribed by play" (1955, 10), to Kurt Reizler, who precedes Fink in using the term *playworld* to refer to a conceptual domain distinct from the actual world within which "things mean what we want them to mean" (1941, 511).

The notion of the gameworld is one that has been used extensively within game studies, with various significations (cf. Aarseth 2008; Leino 2010; Gazzard 2011; Jørgensen 2013; Wolf 2014), and, within the field of computer games, has most commonly come to be used as a synonym for the notion of a 'virtual environment' (Klastrup 2004, 27; Calleja 2007, 44). For the purposes of an understanding of the aesthetic nature of games, however, the term 'gameworld,' however, is best understood in the phenomenological sense in which we have been speaking of a 'world' so far – that is, as an existential domain inseparable from a lived practice of being-in-the-world. As Leino writes, "we could describe [...] games as "worlds for their players" in an experiential sense" (2010, 186). By this understanding, a 'game,' in experiential terms *for* the player, constitutes a discrete world, which implies not

only an existential practice of being-in-the-(game)world, but also the player's existence as a being whose mode of existence is defined precisely as '-in-the-(game)world'.

It is for this reason that the establishment of the gameworld as a distinct ontological and experiential domain is inseparable from the establishment of the ludic subject as the 'I' identified by the player in relation to this domain. As Sebastian Möring puts it, "existential phenomena are repeated in play, as if they were from a world in a world or a life in a life" (2014, 2). Playing a game thereby involves enacting a being-in-the-(game)world whose mode and disposition is, to a great extent, determined by the parameters of the game (recall here Gadamer's point about the "comportment" particular to every game). This mode of being-in-the-gameworld is not only adopted and enacted by the player, but also, through its status as play, reflected and brought forth into presentation. In the aesthetic mode, then, a game reveals both a lived world and a subjective being towards that world, united in the form of an existential being-in-the-world that, in being acted out, is both *lived* and *presented*.

Conclusions

Following Nancy's bridging of the Kantian aesthetic tradition with Heideggerian existential phenomenology, the force of art was conceptualized as being that of bringing forth the *world*, in the sense of an existential domain unfolding around human being as being-in-the-world, into presentation. Out of the lived unity of being-in-the-world, each respective art form isolates a single facet, which, in being thus set apart from the practical, pre-reflective everyday practices of being, is presented to conscious perception, taking on the shape of a new formal unity.

In Nancy's example, the muse of painting presides over the presentation of a pictorial mode of being, which is inseparable from the presentation, in the form of the painting, of a pictorial organization of the world. The insight this paper has worked towards is that the ludic form isolates, and, thus, presents an *active* mode of being: what is foregrounded in the ludic art form is the power to act – what Merleau-Ponty terms the 'I can' – as a constitutive aspect of our being-in-the-world. Put in different words: what games present to us is ourselves as active beings engaging in an existential practice, acting upon the things of the world in the light of our purposes. The form that the ludic Muse presides over is that of the world organized according to the logic of a practice, of things arranged according to an instrumental complex radiating outwards from our subjective standpoint, constituting a 'world' understood as a network of affordances and obstacles, possibilities and limitations, action and reaction, decisions and consequences.

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