

## **Non-Space in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim***

Francesca Borg Taylor-East  
University of Malta

The following paper deals with the question of whether we can conceptualise "non-space" through the fast-travel mechanic in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, 2011). In order to deal with the posed question, I shall be viewing Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the perception of space. This shall serve as the basis for us to then continue our discussion on space. Then, I shall move onto Yi-Fu Tuan and Edward Casey's philosophies of navigation and place respectively in order to further view how people deal with space and movement. Keeping all this in mind, I shall see how Merleau-Ponty has been applied to digital games through Rune Klevjer's understanding of avatar based games. Following this, I shall examine Marie Laure Ryan's concept of recentering and how this has been applied to virtual environments through Jan Van Looy's virtual recentering. This will give us a holistic view of how players navigate and perceive space in a virtual environment.

### **Merleau-Ponty & A Sense Space**

In order to have a basis of understanding space, I shall use Merleau-Ponty's notion of the perception of space. According to Merleau-Ponty, the traditional view of space, space as a container, is an experiential error. This notion of space is characterised as pre-existing and independent of our perception (Morris, 2004, p. 5). Following this, the traditional view questions how then depth perception reconstitutes measures of that already established space (Morris, 2004, p. 6). Subsequently viewing space as wholly beyond the perceiver and viewing depth perception almost as if it took place wholly within the perceiver (Morris, 2004, p. 28). Of course, in the traditional view they needed to acknowledge that there is a crossing between body and world through the body perceiving depth within the world. Traditional analyses of space acknowledges a crossing but also severs it, either through predominantly viewing space as beyond the perceiver as did Berkeley through the given (Morris, 2004, p. 10), or as predominantly putting emphasis on the perceiving subject as with Kant's categories (Morris, 2004, p. 11).

This leads us to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as viewing our sense of space as arising from the intersection between the body and the world (Morris, 2004, p. 5). Through this, the body is not a self-contained and neither is the perceived world. Merleau-Ponty's aim is to show that the sense of space is fundamentally rooted within the crossing of body and world (Morris, 2004, p. 5). It is perhaps useful to mention here that this shatters the subject-object division held within traditional philosophy on this point (Morris, 2004, p. 5). Though we shall not be delving into this, it allows us to conceptualise this crossing of body and world in a clearer light.

Our experience of depth also arises from this crossing of body and world so that we may have a sense of space. It is thus appropriate to speak of a sense of depth. It is even more suitable to

understand the French “sens”, for it not only connotes meaning and the senses, but also direction. The word “sens” suggests a link between meaning and direction (Morris, 2004, pp. 23-24). Merleau-Ponty plays on this link that *sens* suggests – there is *sens* between the “body's moving directedness toward the world” (Morris, 2004, p. 24).

I would like to continue in terms of Merleau-Ponty's body schema. *Sens* arises from the movement that crosses body and world. The schema needs to be noted as coming from movement and belonging to movement – it is dynamic (Morris, 2004, p. 33). Morris notes that this schema is based in habit, this “schema crosses over into the places in which we form habits, the places which we inhabit” (Morris, 2004, p. 33). In a passage in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty notes that the theory of body schema is a theory of perception. The body schema serves as a bridge between the body and the perceived world. Furthermore, it can be said that the body schema communicates *sens* to body and world (Morris, 2004, p. 35).

In viewing space as arising from the dynamic crossing of body and world, we must also understand this crossing in a deeper view. Merleau-Ponty shows that “[body] parts are not spread out side by side, but [are] enveloped in each other” (Morris, 2004, p. 115). The zones of the body must function together in unity. The word “zone” here captures the concept of movement distributed along the body. Enveloping does not occur only at the level of the body, the body's zones envelop one another in perceptual movement. The body's movement crosses with the world, thus envelopment is not unique to the body, but is actual in the movement that crosses body and world. Here, Morris uses the term “envelope” in a descriptive manner (Morris, 2004, pp. 114-117).

“Experience discloses beneath objective space, in which the body eventually takes up place, a primitive spatiality of which [objective space] is merely the outer envelope and which merges with the body's very being. To be a body is to be tied to a certain world, as we have seen; our body is not primarily in space: it is of it” (Morris, 2004, pp. 118-119).

This leads us to the notion of bodily space. Morris gives the example of one's eyes moving toward a thing. This movement places the thing within bodily space, giving it primordial depth, but this movement of my eyes shows a detachment from the thing. It also puts the thing in its own place (Morris, 2004, pp. 122-123). The point in which the body and world cross is not really a point. Following Merleau-Ponty, Morris has attended to it as an inner texture – a topologic of envelopment. “[.]body-world movement generates envelopes of perception: an inner envelope in relation to body as place, an outer envelope in relation to larger place” (Morris, 2004, p. 126). “Our *sens* of space refers to body-world movement, to a moving schema of perception” (Morris, 2004, p. 158).

## **From Space to Place**

Here, I would like to move onto Tuan and Casey's philosophies. Both Tuan and Casey follow Merleau-Ponty's line of thinking. However, they do so in distinct ways. Thus, it is important to note that their uses of “space” and “place” in particular will differ. This said, their philosophies are still grounded in the perception of space. Moreover, both of them will grant

us deeper insight into place. In terms of Tuan, I will primarily be focusing on navigation, and in terms of Casey, I will be illustrating his philosophy of "place".

In Tuan's *Space and Place*, he examines how people learn mazes and this is done through illustrating Brown's experimentation (Tuan, 1977, pp. 70-71). According to Brown's experimentation, people learn a succession of movements rather than mental spatial configuration or mental mapping (Tuan, 1977, p. 70). In terms of a maze, the subject begins as perceiving undifferentiated space, but as the subject learns the appropriate movements and identifies landmarks, the maze becomes one locality. It ends as a single object situation or place (Tuan, 1977, p. 72). According to Tuan, when "space feels thoroughly familiar to us, it has become place" (Tuan, 1977, p. 73).

What is particularly relevant to this study, and is something which can be loosely equated with Merleau-Ponty's body-world movement, is Tuan's research on landmarks. As was mentioned, when a subject goes through a maze, landmarks represent the stages of their journey. Each iteration of the journey through the maze is accompanied with more and more landmarks. These landmarks may take the form of a "rough spot" or a "tilting board", "double turns" etc. (Tuan, 1977, p. 71). These landmarks are intrinsically connected to the subject's movement within the maze, they are known as required movement at specific points. Furthermore, a recognition of error also serves the same purpose here in terms of the subject's traversal of the maze. According to Tuan, "I made the same mistake last time" indicated a recognition of locality (Tuan, 1977, p. 72). This also refers to the succession of movement that a subject must implement to navigate the maze.

Even though subjects were successful in navigating the maze from undifferentiated space to place, they still had difficulty in reproducing the spatiality of the maze on paper. Their drawings were distorted to such an extent that they were not able to be used as a map (Tuan, 1977, pp. 72-73). Following these experiments, Tuan goes on to explain that in a narrow sense, spatial skill is what can be accomplished with the body. In a broad sense, spatial skill is manifest through the body and our tie to place (Tuan, 1977, p. 75).

Following what has been discussed by Tuan, I shall move onto to Casey, delving particularly into Casey on body and place. Casey explores the intimate relationship between body and place. Knowledge of place begins with being-in-place (Casey, 2009, p. 46). Casey follows Merleau-Ponty, in the conception of the body being the first here (Morris, 2004, p. 2), (Casey, 2009, pp. 50-51). One's own body is the necessary and the sufficient condition of being located *here*. Casey notes that this is what Husserl refers to as the "absolute here" (Casey, 2009, p. 51). Furthermore, the living body has the capacity to regain orientation (after extreme situations of disorientation), or at the very least, the body has the capacity to "integrate lostness with an ongoing situatedness" (Casey, 2009, p. 51).

Casey describes the various ways of what it means to be *here*, of these, I would like to examine one in particular, the "*Here of my by-body*". I shall refer back to this point in particular when discussing the fast-travel mechanic in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* in terms of the avatar's movement from one node to another. According to Casey, when one moves, one experiences a specific kind of *hereness*. This is a *hereness* that moves with and by the body.

When one moves to locate a book or answer the phone, one moves in a particular way – the body becomes an instrument to fulfil a particular goal. Within this category, the body is that *by which* one may realise a specific action. It is not strictly associated with an instrumental activity. Casey notes that each time one moves their body out of a strictly stationary position, one experiences such a here.

Following this, Casey also refers to the "*Regional here*" which refers to not only the place through which one is moving, but all all of the places one can move to (Casey, 2009, pp. 52-53). Now we have what Casey refers to as a pattern of nodal points which constitute reachable points and their connecting paths within the near. These imply the infrastructure of any given place. As one moves and modifies their position, the pattern itself shifts altering the bodily locus. This is what Casey refers to as an *arc of reachability*. This is the relation between the body and the pathways with reachables (Casey, 2009, p. 60).

### **Digital Games: A Phenomenological Approach**

I would now like to shift our attention toward digital games. For the purposes of answering the posed question, I shall use Klevjer's application of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in *Enter the Avatar*. Klevjer's application of Merleau-Ponty is predominantly done through his philosophy of perception in avatar based games.

In terms of avatar based games, Klevjer notes that one could say that the playable characters are being "driven or piloted by the players" (Klevjer, 2012, p. 18). He refers to this as prosthetic agency. It functions as an extension or prosthesis of the player. They player finds themselves within the gameworld through this prosthesis, the player is extended within the gameworld (Klevjer, 2012, p. 19). However, Klevjer makes a distinction between the avatar's extension and other bodily extensions which could include driving a car, playing the piano or using a walking stick. In digital games, our body extends across a material divide into "screen space". (Klevjer, 2012, pp. 20, 24).

Klevjer first goes on to examine games such as *Spacewar!* and *Pong* to show what exactly is extended and how this extension takes place. The player feels as though they are extending their touch with objects in screen space. This happens through the interface of the controller wherein the player's extended touch comes to function like a prosthesis of their own body (Klevjer, 2012, pp. 25-26). Klevjer then turns his attention toward avatar based games, wherein the avatar becomes an extension of the player through the physical gamepad. In such games (here, Klevjer specifies action-adventure games), where there is an external environment through which the player must navigate, the avatar's relationship with the environment is of utmost importance. The player is able to perceive the environment and the scope behind this relationship is for the player to act intuitively within it. Such games offer navigation, exploration and combat, these games give the player the environment as something to be discovered and conquered as part of the avatar's travels within the gameworld (Klevjer, 2012, p. 27).

Screen space becomes a world that the player inhabits and a world that the player also becomes subjected to. The player begins to learn how to navigate through the world, how to

judge situations based on the environment and the dangers that they may face (Klevjer, 2012, p. 28). Here, this may resonate with Tuan's notions of undifferentiated space become place (Tuan, 1977, p. 73). According to Klevjer, the prosthetic avatar reconfigures our perceptual ecology: it extends us into screen space into a new set of affordances. However, this does not explain the player's intuitive experience within screen space. Here, Klevjer points towards Merleau-Ponty's concept of the dual nature of the body as both subject and object in order to clarify this matter. The prosthetic avatar allows us to participate in a temporary separation of subjective and objective body across the material divide into screen space. While the player's body may be *here*, sitting on the chair, the extended body-subject is directed to screen space. This renders the avatar as a replacement of the objective body, making the objective body that is sitting *here* irrelevant – an object amongst objects. As body-subject, the player might be navigating through the world, engaging in combat etc., as body-object the player is participating through a proxy: the avatar (Klevjer, 2012, p. 28).

Klevjer makes the point here that while fiction is indeed a vital element of the gameworld, the player's experience of being taken into the gameworld is heavily reliant on the phenomenology of the body. This is further evident through the sense of bodily immersion that the player experience is founded upon the body being able to “intuitively re-direct into screen space” (Klevjer, 2012, p. 29).

At this point, I would like to introduce Ryan's notion of recentering which will lead us to Van Looy's adaptation of the concept to a virtual recentering. Although we have already seen how the body is extended and re-directed within screen space through Klevjer's phenomenology, the concept of virtual recentering will help to elaborate upon a player's cognition when entering a virtual environment.

Ryan's concept of “recentering” stems from Kripke's possible-worlds theory, wherein reality, as the sum of what could be imagined, consists of a plurality of worlds. One of these worlds is not only possible but actual. A world is only possible if it is linked to the actual world through what is called an accessibility relation (Ryan, 2006). Kripke's theory is an exercise in formal semantics for non-classical logic (Mutley, 1995).

Following this, Ryan makes the argument for fictional worlds. Here, her notion of “world” refers to a space situated in time. Recentering constitutes a possible world becoming actual, argued in the light of fictional worlds. The reader temporarily accepts the fictional world and transports themselves within this fictional world, becoming part of it. Thus, this possible alternative becomes the actual. The notion of recentering puts into practice the indexical theory of actuality (Ryan, 2006).

Van Looy's point of argument follows from Ryan's notion of recentering but adapts it toward a virtual recentering. Van Looy uses the example of the digital game *Myst* in order to make his argument. Van Looy points out that the notion of fictional recentering is conceived of as a matter of language. He contends this point in the case of digital games and to make a case of virtual recentering. When entering the game, the player accepts the movement into a virtual environment in a similar (but not identical) way to accepting a fictional world. The player becomes recentered within the virtual environment cognitively, and thus, spatially. The player

cognitively accepts the affordances of the virtual environment and of the avatar: the player accepts that there is a possible world wherein they are a ninja etc. (Van Looy, 2005).

Here, we can see a similarity between Van Looy and Klevjer, wherein the player reconfigures their perceptual ecology to be aligned with the gameworld's affordances (Klevjer, 2012, p. 28). However, Van Looy equates this virtual recentering to a shift in cognition (Van Looy, 2005), while Klevjer shows this to be the result of a phenomenological bodily extension wherein the player is re-directed into screen space through the avatar as a proxy.

### ***The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim***

This leads us to our case study: *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, 2011). We shall examine the game and its fast travel mechanic in order to then apply the above theories to the mechanic. This will allow us to try to conceptualise the negation of space within *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* is a first person action role-playing digital game. The player enters an open world and has a number of quests to complete and can develop their character by improving skill sets etc. The environment consists of expanses of wilderness, towns, forests, dungeons, cities and villages. The player may roam freely through the open world. Here, we can see how what has been discussed throughout this paper may apply to the game, from Tuan's undifferentiated space to place, Klevjer's application of Merleau-Ponty in avatar based games and Van Looy's virtual recentering.

In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, the players can travel on foot, on horseback, or can utilize the fast travel mechanic. This mechanic allows players to travel back to previously discovered locations. The fast travel mechanic is a quick method of travel, which takes place in real time through a loading screen (although it should be noted that time in the game would elapse as though the player had walked there). Fast travel can be done through using the world map for free and the player chooses their point of destination. One can also fast travel via carriages which allows the player to travel to major cities, even if they have not travelled there before. This type of travel comes with a fee relative to the distance travelled and to the importance of the city.

In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, the player is met with undifferentiated space until they equate themselves with their surroundings for it to become place in terms of Tuan (Tuan, 1977, p. 73). It is also quite interesting that in order to fast travel with the world map, the player must have already discovered the location of the destination. The player can only travel to familiar surroundings, that is, place, through the world map. In terms of fast travel, the player can choose their destination of travel, and can travel from one node to another. This resonates with Casey's elaboration on the *Here of my by-body* and the *Regional here* (Casey, 2009, p. 53). The fast travel mechanic presents different nodes for a player to travel to, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* even offers different methods of travel. However, the avatar still remains the first *here* within the game.

Here, I would like to analyse this point in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*: a player travelling from a point of departure to a specified destination using the fast travel mechanic. How can

we conceptualise the fast travel loading screen in terms of space? It is perhaps useful to examine this type of travel using the authors we have previously discussed to make a case.

Once the player has chosen their destination, whether they are travelling via world map or via carriages, the player's avatar – the player's proxy to use Klevjer's phrase (Klevjer, 2012, p. 28) – is no longer controllable and the virtual environment is inaccessible to the player. In light of what we have previously discussed, there is no proxy for the player – both the body-subject and body-object are no longer present within the virtual environment as the bodily extension has been severed. Subsequently, the player has been de-situated from the virtual environment. In light of Van Looy's virtual recentering, we can perhaps say that the player is, at the very least, partially decentered (or centered once again within the actual). This is due to being unable to access the virtual environment through movement: there being nothing to accept on the level of spatial cognition.

In terms of Tuan, the loading screen of the fast travel mechanic cannot be said to be undifferentiated space for there is no potential for it to become familiar through navigation or recognition of landmarks. There is no potential for place or locality. Looking at Merleau-Ponty and Casey, since the game severs the body-subject and body-object through the player being unable to interact with the world, the avatar proxy lost and the player partially decentered, there is no *here* within the virtual environment – there is no *here* within fast travel. Moreover, there is no *here of my by-body* or *regional here* since the first *here* of the proxy avatar is lost through the severing of the bodily extension into screen space. Furthermore, going back to Merleau-Ponty's sense of space, there is no dynamic crossing between body and world: the familiar world of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and the player's proxy have become inaccessible. Where does this leave us in conceptualising fast travel?

By discussing the above concepts we could also see the concepts' negation within *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim's* fast travel mechanic. The intermediary between the nodes of departure and destination, of place, is spatially void to the player. My argument lies here, the decentering and de-situating of the player imply our sense of screen space to be negated. Then perhaps, we can see the fast travel mechanic as presenting the opportunity to conceptualise “screen-non-space”.

Throughout this paper, we have seen phenomenological views of space and place through Merleau-Ponty and Casey respectively. We have also seen how navigation plays a vital role in our surroundings in terms of both space and place through Tuan. We have examined Klevjer's approach of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in digital games. Through the analysis of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, we were able to see how the above not only applied to the digital game, but how the fast travel mechanic in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* posed a unique opportunity to conceptualise the negation of screen space. This may further aid us in conceptualising space in digital games by allowing us to differentiate between types of “space”, or rather space and its negation. This may be an opportunity or a call for a further categorisation of space and place within digital games. Digital games are presenting us with a unique opportunity to analyse concepts of metaphysics that have not been dealt with to great extents.

## Games

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