

The computer game as a bodily experience

I find it difficult to imagine computer games being anything at all without an embodied player actively engaging with the game. In my thesis I wish to explore this bodily and perceptual relation between player and game. Furthermore I want to explore the aesthetic implications of this relation. I will propose phenomenology as a possible approach.

The phenomenological method

Phenomenology (as found in Maurice Merleau-Ponty) examines the human relation to the world and emphasizes bodily perception as the foundation for this relation. In addition, phenomenological thinkers such as Martin Heidegger, Don Ihde and Peter Paul Verbeek have played defining roles in the philosophy of technology elucidating the human relation to technology. In other words; phenomenology seems to be a possible approach when I wish to examine the relation between human (player) and technology (game) and the body's potential to give meaning to the experience of games. In order to explicate how phenomenology as a method might play a role in computer game studies, I will briefly look at Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* as he in its preface sketches what phenomenology is.

In the phenomenological catchphrase "*To the things themselves*" (coined by Edmund Husserl) or in Merleau-Ponty's note that phenomenology "...*does not expect to arrive at any understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity'*"¹ we are promised a return to the essence of things. But how does this return come about? How do we grasp computer games *as they are*?

Phenomenology is described as a manner or style of thinking. We might also call it a certain way of "looking" at the world – a certain kind of reflection towards the world. It is a matter of holding back our natural attitude to the world in order to attend the experiencing of things as opposed to the things of experience – we must concern ourselves with how as opposed to what things are. Accordingly, to disclose the essence of things is done by way of descriptively revealing how we relate to them. In

¹ Merleau-Ponty p. vii

the relation the meaning of things is already there. It would distance us from the things themselves if we tried to explain or analyze them as something separate.² As Merleau-Ponty states; “*The real has to be described, not constructed or formed.*”³

In consequence phenomenology presents us with a “tool” in order to perform this description – the phenomenological reduction. In explaining it Merleau-Ponty emphasizes Eugen Fink’s formulation of the reduction as “*wonder’ in the face of the world.*”⁴ That is, the phenomenological reduction is to employ the before mentioned way of “looking” or wondering. Doing this we question our natural attitude and our apparent familiarity with things and the world. We perform a certain kind of critical reflection – but not reflection that abstracts us from the world. The reduction does not grant us a detached spectator-view of the world. Instead, it points out our ‘facticity’ in the world – “*radical reflection amounts to a consciousness of its own dependence on an unreflective life which is its initial situation, unchanging, given once and for all.*”⁵ To Merleau-Ponty critical reflection holds the possibility for disclosing the things themselves when reflection is performed as a phenomenological reduction. That is, the reflection becomes sensitive to the ground on which reflection arises. We might conceive it as “*...the ambition to make reflection emulate the unreflective life of consciousness*”.⁶

A phenomenology of computer games?

To do a phenomenology of computer games I must acquire this particular way of “looking” at games. By asking the question “*what are computer games?*” a critical reflection has taken its initial steps. I have begun to suspend my natural attitude toward games. But, reflection has an unfortunate risk of leading us away from the things themselves into what Merleau-Ponty calls a “*incomplete form of reflection which loses sight of its own beginning.*”⁷ So in order not to lose sight of the things themselves we must attend their *beginning*. We can do this by rephrasing the above question from “*what?*” to “*how are computer games?*” As asking what the game is presupposes that

² Merleau-Ponty pp. vii - ix

³ Merleau-Ponty p. xi

⁴ Merleau-Ponty p. xv

⁵ Merleau-Ponty p. xvi

⁶ Merleau-Ponty p. xvii

⁷ Merleau-Ponty p. xi

the game actually presents itself to us, objectifies the game into a thing in itself. This pushes our reflection away from our experience of the game into intellectual abstraction. On the other hand, asking how points back to the facticity of the game – it's coming into being – enabling us to attend the relation between player and game. When doing a phenomenology of computer games this relation is the beginning we must not lose sight of. And, we might add, the notion of *beginning* is essential in the phenomenological style or manner of thinking. Husserl talks about the philosopher as a “*perpetual beginner*”⁸ and of phenomenology as a “*dialogue*” or an “*infinite meditation*.”⁹ Similarly Merleau-Ponty characterizes it as an “*ever-renewed experiment in making its own beginning*”.¹⁰ Hence, *beginning* should not be considered part of a linear sequence with a possible *end* as phenomenology focuses on a circular motion of thought – to return to the beginning and start over. But you might rightfully ask; how can we identify the beginning of a circular motion? We might think of the *beginning* as the coming into being of foreground and background. To Merleau-Ponty such a *beginning* is perception as it spontaneously organises things and the world in fore- and background. Put differently, perception is where we will find, and from where we will be able to describe our primordial take on the world – the essence of things. Perception is the background on which our world arises, or as Merleau-Ponty describes it; “*Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them.*”¹¹ Perception is thus the flux from which the things themselves arise.

With this in mind I can begin to reflect on computer games and what characterizes my experience of them. Playing computer games is characterized by a sense of engagement, an engagement much like that of my regular being-in-the-world. I am situated in the world as a bodily actor relating to things and others, not as a spectator to it. Similarly I do not place myself at a distance from the game and wait for it to unfold. Rather, I relate and engage with the game. I live and experience the game as tasks and actions I perform. In other words I am concerned with how to unfold the

⁸ Merleau-Ponty p. xv

⁹ Merleau-Ponty p. xxiii

¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty p. xv

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty p. xi

game – its possibilities. I can only unfold the game's possibilities by picking up the controller and interacting with the game. To experience the game is first of all a matter of know-how. This does not rule out reflection of this experience, which I also consider an aspect of playing computer games, but it is only from my bodily perception of the game these reflections arise. Hence, I am not engaging the computer game as a pure "intellect" but as a whole body – I sense or perceive the game's meaning intertwining it with my interpretations of the game. The computer game is most evidently a sensuous experience; we see and hear the audiovisual features and interact with it correspondingly. It is only via this subjective and bodily engagement with the computer game it presents itself to me as a player. So to follow Merleau-Ponty's guidelines; if we are to grab hold of games in their 'facticity' consequently describing their 'essence' we must do so on the background of perception. The game discloses itself on the background of my perception in three ways; as vision, hearing and touch. In addition this perceptual relation to the game is mediated by technological artifacts – what we might call a human-technology relation. It is by relating to screen, controller and speakers we perceive the game. In my further work I call for a closer examination of these relations.

Towards new conceptions

As I have tried to sketch, a phenomenology of computer games is not an effort to grasp the whole field of computer games all at once. Instead, a phenomenology of computer games will hopefully reinsert the player's body as an important aspect of understanding games. With an emphasis on the player-game relation a return to the things themselves entails more close-readings of particular games. That is, due to the varieties in games, genres and platforms it would not be to grasp the player and the game in their facticity if I tried to examine all these things at once. As opposed to generalizing about computer games, a return to the essence points to the concreteness of particular games. We must attend the different materiality of platforms and the differences between and within genres.

Following this focus on the concrete I think a phenomenology of computer games is to arrive at a different conception of the interface. We must challenge the potential dualism inherent in our *look* at the visual interface. This is done by taking into

account the material and auditory aspects of our perception of the game – the integrity of the interface. As Hansen and Wamberg sketch in *Interface eller Interlace?*¹² a “traditional” split between mind and body pervades the common conception of the interface. Originating in a division of machine and media; the machine is something in direct contact with the physical reality of the world (equivalent to the body), while the media is something that via the intellect presents the world as an imaginary presence (equivalent to the mind). Most often being a flat visual surface for representation the interface has been regarded as yet another media – a semiotic passageway for intellectual stimulation.¹³ But the computer presents more than this surface. As it gives us possible access and direct contact with the “materiality” of the media (and in some cases the world) the computer becomes a “media-machine” with the potential for unifying the split.¹⁴ In turn the conception of the interface (and the interface of computer games) as merely a surface of representation is questioned... “*when does reality’s direct, non-interpretive, interaction between objects and forces cease, and where begins the symbolic exchange where objects and forces are not “themselves” but refer to something else?*”¹⁵

The above question resonates in our conception of the aesthetic potential of computer games. Is a traditional Kantian¹⁶ conception of aesthetics as a reflective intellectual dialogue enough? In the continuous movement towards more “real” graphics, animations, physics engines, A.I. etc and the focus on new and more bodily ways of interacting with games (Nintendo Wii, Guitar Hero, PS-eye) designers and players alike seem to be caught up in a desire for the “real”. That is, to be able to have direct, real, and non-interpretive access to the game on different perceptual levels – either as audiovisual or bodily gestural transparency. Hence, instead of neglecting this apparently desirable and fascinating bodily dialogue between player and game, I propose a re-examination of the body’s aesthetic potential in computer games – maybe laying the ground for a bodily or perceptual aesthetic of computer games.

¹² IN Hansen, Lone Kofoed & Pold, Søren – *Interface: Digital kunst & kultur* – Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2007

¹³ Hansen & Wamberg 2007, pp. 83-84

¹⁴ Hansen & Wamberg 2007, pp. 86-87

¹⁵ Hansen & Wamberg 2007, p. 88 (my translation)

¹⁶ Nielsen 2007, pp. 6-8

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