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The Irreducible Self: Image Studies of First Person Perspective Computer Games

1. Introduction

In this paper I will claim that first person shooter games have to be conceived of as artifacts that, by means of visual presentation, provide a proof for the existence of the self as a structural relation. In other words, a certain type of video game, conceived of predominantly as an image, can function as a argument for a philosophical concept.

2. Image Studies: Games as Images

My thesis assumes that computer games are, first and foremost, pictorial objects, viz. images. As the initial debate on principles within the young branch of computer game studies has shown, there is a contradictory and even aporetical opposition between ludological and narratological approaches to games (Frasca 2003). To both positions – the narratological as well as the ludological – a computer game is not categorically different from what already existed before the age of computational technology: a text or a game. Computer games therefore are taken as a transformation or transposition of something old into a new medium; the text becomes an interactive text and play becomes virtual play.

It is striking, as far as I can tell, that no one yet has noted the fact that computer games are *images*. – At least no one has noted that this instance is of fundamental relevance to the study of computer games. Only a related argument has been made on this, stating that computer games are immersive by means of their presentational aspect. In her article on *Immersion, Engagement, and Presence* Alison McMahan (2003), for example, makes an important claim: she points out that one has to distinguish carefully between immersion in a *diegetic* and immersion in a *non-diegetic* sense. In the diegetic sense, "immersion" designates the aspect of someone being fascinated by the narration of the game or the game play. Different from this, on the non-diegetic level, "immersion" indicates the aspect of someone having the feeling of what McMahan, with respect to Jonathan Steuer (1992), calls a "being there." Immersion is thus understood as the illusory impact of the medium. (And, I would add, as the illusory impact of the image.) However, immersion in the non-diegetic sense describes only a contingent and empirical fact of someone losing the feeling for the difference between medial

content and its natural surrounding. Therefore, immersion actually says nothing about the medium, but rather something about the user. And that means that immersion is not an attribute, which can be applied to the game's design, but rather to the psychological condition of the gamer.

Nevertheless McMahan provides a hint as to which aspect of the game as a pictorial artifact is a necessary precondition for immersion, namely *presence*. To McMahan, the feeling of "being there" is only achieved when the virtual space in which the player immerses is presented artificially. Presence, however, is a central feature of images; what images do is present objects that only exist on behalf of the image. Just as a record can artificially present sound to the human ear, pictures artificially present things that are only visible to the human eye. But, as opposed to objects of the real world, image-objects can only exist or not exist. They cannot be absent like a person who is not here at the moment. Objects that are presented to a viewer by a picture are either present or they do not exist. In addition, pictures thus do not show things that are now absent and present somewhere else in the world, but they add new things to the world right here and right now.

The same is true for computer games; they do not show something that is absent, instead they *present* something that has not existed before without being visualized. Video games present a virtual reality. But different from other types of images, computer games offer images, which have to be used. In my opinion, we must therefore think of *video games as something that must been seen in order to be played*. Without that particular performativity a computer game is not different from a movie or even a photograph.

Furthermore, this means that there exists a significant difference even *within* computer games; on the one hand, there are games that could also be played without a computer, just on paper, such as strategy games or role-playing games. On the other hand there are games that cannot be played without an image. But, as opposed to photographs, paintings, or even films, computer game pictures are *interactive*. The mode of reception of a computer game is therefore not contemplation, but rather interaction. And what the player does when he or she interacts is actually an interaction with the image, i.e. with the objects presented by the picture.

My proposal at this point is to address these images formally as "simulation" or simulation pictures. There has been an ongoing debate in computer game studies on whether simulation refers to a certain type of computer game or to something that is not a game at all. Chris

Crawford (1984), for example, has argued that a simulation is the opposite of a game; for him, FLIGHT SIMULATOR, for instance, is not a game, since there is no aim or goal of the game other than learning how to fly. On the contrary, strategy games are sometimes referred to as "simulation games" because they provide tools for anticipating future developments on the basis of empirical values and a working model. – To me, neither of the two usages is appropriate; following Crawford, DOOM would not have to be considered a game because the interactive picture only simulates the use of different weapons. Conversely, the second usage of the term applies to nothing that is specific to computer games (even though 'strategy games' are a designated game genre). Like any other "simulation," i.e. in the social sciences, a simulation can also be calculated without the aid of a computer. – It just takes a little longer.

In speaking of a "simulation" I would like to address images that are transformed by the user. To put it more strictly, the way a simulation picture is received is the user's interaction with the picture. This means that, in contrast to a movie image, a simulation image does not reproduce movement, but rather produces it. So in my opinion, FLIGHT SIMULATOR can rightly be addressed as a computer game. In a theoretical respect, it furthermore can even be considered to be a systematic nucleus of computer games; what makes computer games different from all other artifacts is, in my view, the fact that they present objects that someone engages with on the basis of pure visibility. It would thus be more specific to call those artifacts "video games" and not only "computer games." (Usually this term is applied to arcade games. In the Anglo-Saxon context the term is sometimes used conversely as a mere substitute for "computer games.")

To me this problem is not a matter of theoretical self-sufficiency, but is essential to the way we approach virtual gaming. Do we think of it as something new, or is it just something we already had before the age of computers? To turn the problem into a decent question: *Are there any computer games or video games in which the gaming principle is derived purely from the structure of the simulation-image itself?* If the response to this question is positive, then we have proof for the conjecture that computer or video games are phenomena *sui generis*. In my view those games which prove that computer games have, in fact, brought about something new are first person shooters; in a shooter game the interaction is strictly derived from the formal organization of the visual image. (I would even go so far as to argue that an interactive image, which is designed according to the principle of central perspective, can only provoke that particular usage of 'aiming and shooting'. – Any other usage does not derive from that very composition of the picture.)

3. Philosophy: Concepts as Games

The first person has offered a problem to Philosophy since the classical era. Undoubtedly the most prominent theory of subjectivity or self-consciousness is the Cartesian concept of the *res cogitans*; Descartes thinks of the world as something opposed to the spectator. Even the body of the I is only a part of the extensional world, which separates it from the mind. That is the reason why in Descartes' skepticism, the existence of the body can be doubtful, but not the existence of the *res cogitans*. To put this in terms of the video game, Descartes' ontology is that of a classical computer game in which the visible world also appears as a *res extensa*. One need only recall games like FROGGER or ZAXXON, in which the acting person, animal or vehicle is part of the objective world. It is presented as an extended corpus amongst other objects that persist within the virtual world. That corpus is what is called an "avatar". Even though the avatar can be steered freely by the player, the figure itself is part of the game world and subordinated to its defined physical conditions. Freedom only exists on the side of the player and on his or her side of the screen. The player is situated in the *res cogitans,* whereas the avatar is located in the realm of the *res extensa*.

In my opinion this is one reason why many video game theorists tend to speak of computer games spaces as "representational spaces." In many games the interaction with the objects that appear is based on a representational relation in the Cartesian sense. If you think of Descartes' model of vision, which is based on the functionality of a *camera obscura* (Crary 1990), one can be tempted to believe that the human mind is an entity, separated from the world and looking at its objects on a screen. As in the *camera obscura,* the viewer is settled inside an apparatus that represents the outside world. To a player of a classical computer games the visual presentation of that virtual world appears to be a representation of it. One does not steer himself or herself, but rather steers an agent of the self. In philosophy, such a situation provokes the so-called "homunculus fallacy": if the mind observes the world (hence, a representation of it) from the inside, who or what is the instance perceiving what the mind sees?

The Cartesian concept of the self has been heavily criticized throughout modern philosophy. One of its critics was Immanuel Kant, who argued that the self is only an idea that allows us to ensure consistency among our perceptions of the world. To Kant, it is, however, a transcendental condition (for the subject to be). Reacting to Kant, Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in the *Tractatus*: "The subject does not belong to the world but it is a limit of the world" (Prop. 5.632). By some interpretations, this quotation – in the light of the "linguistic

turn" – is an argument against the existence of the subject. In particular, Margaret Anscombe in her essay *The First Person* has argued that when someone says "I," he or she does not make use of a proposition that designates anything that exists as an exclusive object in the world; anybody can say "I." – Very much in line with Nietzsche she conceives of the subject as a "grammatical illusion" that occurs in the search for the cause of a particular "happening" (Anscombe 1975, 64).

I for one think that Wittgenstein should be understood in a different way, taken as a proposition, "I" is not, in fact, something that articulates an individuality. But taken as something that is articulated by a speaker, *saying "I"* is something exclusive to the person who speaks. "I" is thus not a proposition, but an expression of the first person-status. It follows that that relation can no longer be explained within language. If I'm reading Wittgenstein correctly, he argued that the I (or the solitary situation) is nothing that we can truly speak of, but rather something that is true because we can *see* it: "In fact what solipsism *means* is quite correct, only it cannot be *said*, but it shows itself." (Prop. 5.62)

What Wittgenstein addresses here is the truth of the self, revealed to a person being in the world and, furthermore, also being aware of himself or herself as the "border" of his or her perspectival view of the world. What is interesting in the video game context is the fact that, according to Wittgenstein, the truth of solipsism – i.e. that the world is *my* perspective of the world – cannot be deduced from the linguistic proposition "I," but rather *shows itself*. In other words, a world that is *presented* as an exclusive world (solely) to the I. The I or the first person hereby is conceived of as a relational self; the world stands in relation to the subject, and thus the subject is an entity in relation to the world – what Wittgenstein calls the "border." According to Edmund Husserl's teacher, Franz Brentano, this very structure can be addressed by the term "intentionality": in contrast to Descartes' model of the self as a *res cogitans* that is separated from the world, the self according to Brentano (1995) is understood as something that exists only in relation to the world and objects in the world.

In a phenomenological backslash to analytic philosophy, Hector-Neri Castaneda and Roderick Chisholm in particular drew on Brentano's idea of intentionality. Castaneda (1999) reminds us that *I* is not a proposition at all, but furthermore a pronoun. As such, *I* has no reference (*Bedeutung*), but is an indicator for the situation of the first person. And reacting to Chisholm (1981), the utterance of "I" rests upon the conviction that "I am," which in turn provides a matrix for the belief that a proposition can be true.

Now what a first person shooter game as an image achieves is to *show* this intentional relation of a self to the world and its objects. But it does not only "show" it, as Wittgenstein says, but furthermore forces the player to make use of the picture as if the self existed. This is the key point to my argument: I would not say that the I or the self exists in the metaphysical or even in the biological sense. Presumably no one will ever find a proof for this – but the simulation picture of a first person shooter demands that the user behaves as if his I or self existed. And this behavior or interaction with the image-objects presented by the video game derives from the perspectival organization of the simulation image. The main characteristic of this image is the alignment of the vanishing point with the junction of the crosshairs in the view-finder of one's weapon. It is by virtue of this fact that the image presents intentionality.

The movement in virtual space thus is secondary to this primary interaction: for the predominant action is when the player has to make an object coincide with the vanishing point. Factually, he or she does not move in space, but rather primarily moves space itself. In the simulation image the line of sight is centralized and fixed, and what is steered by the interface is the virtual space around it. The simulation picture of the first person shooter type thus visualizes intentionality and, furthermore, uses it as the major basis for interaction. And this interaction derives from the image's composition alone.

4. Conclusion

My argumentation results in two consequences: on the one hand, I have intended to show that computer games must be analyzed as images. Through such an analysis, we may find a third way: approaching these artifacts neither as a form of narration in a new medium nor as a rule based in the virtual realm. On the other hand, I hope to have demonstrated how this approach offers a contribution to the philosophy of computer games: taken as (interactive) picture, certain video games have the potential to give a proof in the form of an image for the existence of a highly disputed philosophical entity, namely the Self.

5. References

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Games

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