The Pictoriality of Video Game Entities

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What is the ontology of video game objects? This question contains three questions. First, are there video game *entities*, strictly speaking? That is, do some or all video game objects actually exist? Second, assuming that at least some computer objects exist, *what* are they? What kind of entities are they, or what kind of being do they have? Third, again assuming that at least some computer objects exist, *how* do they exist? What is their specific mode of being?

I shall focus on the second and third question, taking it for granted that there are video game entities in some sense of the term. In response to the question of their ontological kind, I shall claim that video game entities are what Husserl calls "picture-objects" (*Bildobjekte*). And in response to the question of their mode of being, I shall claim that they are what I will call "derivatively real". Thus, I shall argue that video game entities, or game entities for short, are derivatively real picture-objects.

Before I try to support these claims, I want to say a few words about my approach.

I

My approach is phenomenological. In the present context, this means that I want to determine the ontological status of game entities on the basis of the way in which they become available in our actual and possible dealings with them. More precisely, I want to determine their kind and mode of being on the basis of how they appear as the "intentional objects" of certain kinds of "intentional experience". What does this mean? First of all, what is an intentional experience? And what is the intentional object of an intentional experience?

An intentional experience is a conscious experience that is "of" or "directed on" something other than itself. Perceptions, recollections, imaginings, acts of judgement, valuations, practical decisions and

actions are all examples of intentional experiences. Their intentional structure is indicated by the fact that we cannot specify them without also specifying something that they are of, or on which they are directed.[1] To specify a perception, for instance, we need, *inter alia*, to specify that *of which* it is a perception, say, this table. Similarly, in order to specify a recollection, we need to specify that *of which* it is a recollection, say, yesterday's breakfast. And so on for all the other experiences mentioned.

The intentional object of an intentional experience is simply that on which the experience is directed, whatever it is. Thus, the intentional object of my perception of this table is this table, considered as that of which my perception is a perception. Similarly, the intentional object of my recollection of yesterday's breakfast is yesterday's breakfast, considered as that of which my recollection is a recollection.

Given this, we can describe what it means to determine the ontological status of game entities on the basis of how they appear as the intentional objects of intentional experiences as follows: It means to determine it on the basis of how game entities appear as that on which certain kinds of intentional experience are directed, which kinds we may generally call "gaming experiences".

Before I pursue this approach, I want to forestall a possible objection to it. In characterizing game entities as intentional objects, I do not prejudice the question of their ontological status. An intentional object is not a certain kind of entity with a certain mode of being. In particular, it is not a "mental" entity with "mind-dependent" mode of being. It is simply that on which an intentional experience is directed—whatever it may be, and whatever mode of being it may have. Anything, be it physical or mental, concrete or abstract, real or unreal, mind-independent or mind-dependent, may be an intentional object, and will be if it is that on which some intentional experience is directed.[2] So to regard game entities as intentional objects is not commit to a particular view of their ontological status. It is merely to consider them in their availability in a certain kind of experience, and thereby establish a perspective from which their ontological status may be determined.

II

I have said that I want to determine the ontological status of game entities on the basis of how they appear as the intentional objects of certain kinds of experiences (gaming experiences). So the first question is how game entities appear in this way. To answer this question, we need to have an initial idea of what game entities are. For otherwise we would not know what it is whose appearance as intentional objects we want to clarify. How can we obtain such an idea? We cannot derive it from the notion of a gaming experience. For a gaming experience is simply an intentional experience whose intentional object is a game entity. So if we don't know what a game entity is, we won't know what a gaming experience is either. How, then, can we obtain the idea we need?

I propose we derive it from what could be called our "common-sense" conception of video games: the conception we all implicitly rely on in our actual computer-game related practises. Part of this conception, I would argue, is a conception of video game entities that might be specified roughly as follows: A game entity is any (existing) item—any (existing) object, property, state of affairs, event or process—the engagement with which constitiutes an integral part of the playing of a video game. This is obviously very far from being a definition, but I will not try to improve on it here. Suffice it to say that I want it to include such things as the monsters the player might encounter and the weapons she may use to slay them, and exclude the slices of pizza she may devour in front of the screen in between battles.[3]

Given this, we may specify our question as follows: How do the (existing) items the engagement with which constitiutes an integral part of the playing of a video game appear as the intentional objects of certain experiences on the part of the player?

There is obviously a lot to say on this question. There are myriad ways in which the items in question can appear experientially. But in their appearing they all have some essential features in common. One of these is that they all appear to the player in the form of pictures or images—specifically, in the form of pictures or images on her computer screen.

This provides an answer to our question: Game entities appear as intentional objects in the form of a

certain kind of pictures. And, given my phenomenological approach, this, in turn, suggests an answer to one of the questions contained in the question of the ontological status of game entities, namely, the question of what kind of entities they are, or what kind of being they have: Game entities are picture-entities, or entities with a pictorial form of being.[4]

This is only a preliminary answer, however. For it is not clear what it means for something to appear as an intentional object in the form of a picture. In an attempt to clarify this, I now want to consider a specific model for understanding pictures conceived as intentional objects: namely, the one developed by Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology.

On what we might call Husserl's basic model of picture-consciousness, any appearance of something as a picture, and correlatively, any picture-experience or picture-consciousness, involves three intentional objects. First there is what Husserl calls the "picture-thing" (*Bildding*). This is the physical thing in which the picture is lodged, as it were, or in which it appears. In the case of a photograph, it would be the coloured paper that hangs on the wall, and may be physically modified in various ways: moved, torn, painted over, and so on.[5] Second, there is what Husserl calls the "picture-object" (*Bildobjekt*). This is what we might call the picture or image itself, that which appears or is "depicted" (*darstellt*) in or by the picture-object. In the case of a photograph, it would be the image that appears in or through the coloured paper, the image of a landscape or person, say.[6] Third, there is the "picture-subject" (*Bildsujet*). This is what could be called the pictured itself, the physical thing that is "represented" (*abbildet*) by the picture or, rather, by the picture-object. In the case of the photograph, it would be that which has been photographed, the landscape or person itself.[7]

It is important to note that this threefold distinction is a structural one. The idea, to repeat, is that *any* experience of a picture involves three intentional objects: a picture-thing, a picture-object and a picture-subject. As I have just indicated, these objects are related in a Russian Doll-like manner: the picture-subject is "represented" (*abbildet*) by the picture-object, which is "depicted" (*dargestellt*) by the picture-thing, which, for its part, is simply seen or perceived.[8]

That any picture-experience involves all of these objects in this way, is not to say that the objects have equal experiential weight. Depending on one's interests, and the circumstances, one of them will serve

as the explicit focus of the experience, while the others will be only implicitly present. In seeing a photo of George Bush in connection with a newspaper-story, my experiential focus would usually go through the picture-thing, and the picture-object to the picture-subject: that is, to George Bush himself. By contrast, in looking at, say, a landscape-painting in an art-museum, my focus usually goes through the picture-thing to the picture-object and rests there. This is not, according to the model we are considering, to say that the picture-subject does not play any role at all in the experience. For the picture-object is essentially a representation of a picture-subject: If it didn't represent a picture-subject, it simply wouldn't be a picture (in the sense of a picture-object). The point is simply that, in cases of the kind we are now considering, the picture-subject typically doesn't constitute the thematic focus of the experience. Finally, in the experience I would have of a photograph in retouching it, or of a painting in restoring it, my focus would be on the picture-thing, with the picture-object and the picture-subject only implicitly present.[9]

Is this model of the intentional structure of pictures adequate for understanding the pictoriality of game entities? Let us first try to decide which, if any, of the three intentional objects video game entities should be primarily identified with, or, equivalently, which of them gaming experiences should typically be seen as focused upon.

It seems clear that the picture-items on which I am typically focused in playing a video game are neither picture-things nor picture-subjects. Although, of course, I perceive it, I'm not focused on the computer screen, and the patches of colour it displays, as such. Nor am I focused on anything extra-pictorial that these patches, by way of the picture-object they depict, could be said to represent. Should we then conceive game entities as picture-objects?

There are good reasons to think so. The most important is related to what Husserl calls the *quasi*-perceptual, or *as-if* mode of appearing of picture-objects, which, in turn, derives from the way in which their appearance is conditioned by the experience of a certain kind of perceptual conflict. Considered by itself, so to speak, an experience of a picture-object has a certain perceptual character: Like a perception, it appears to place something itself directly in front of our eyes within a space of actual and possible perceptual continuity, or what Husserl calls a "perceptual horizon". But considered in the context in which it concretely occurs—that is, as an experience of something depicted by a picture-

thing—it looses that status. For then it is brought into conflict with the experience of the picture-thing, with its perceptual horizon, into which the picture-object, with its pictorial horizon, cannot be coherently fitted: Whereas the immediate pictorial horizon is, say, that of a snowy Alpine landscape, the immediate perceptual horizon of the picture-thing, in which the pictorial horizon is lodged, might be that of a photo-album laying on a table. And as a consequence of this conflict, the appearance of the picture-object takes on the character of a *quasi*-perceptual appearance, an appearance that is *as if* it were perceptual. To highlight this feature of the appearance of picture-objects, Husserl sometimes refers to them as "perceptual fictions" or "ficta" (*perzeptive Fikta*).

Now, game entities are like picture-objects in this regard: They too have a *quasi*-perceptual mode of appearing, one which, like that of picture-objects, derives from a conflict between pictorial and perceptual horizons—in this case, the pictorial horizon that co-constitues the game environment of the player, and the perceptual horizon that constitutes co-constitues her non-game environment.[10] This correspondance is obviously most pronounced in the case of game entities belonging to first-person scenarios, but I believe it can be extended to other cases as well.

Yet there is a crucial difference between game entities and picture-objects as hitherto construed. Unlike game objects, game entities typicallly do not have picture-subjects associated with them. That is, they do not, like picture-objects, typically represent anything beyond themselves. (And if they do, their doing so is not essential to their ludic status.) A game monster does not represent an extra-ludic physical monster. Nor does a game sword represent an extra-ludic physical sword. As game entities, the monster and the sword are both fully self-contained.

This, however, does not mean that game entities could not be picture-objects, or perceptual fictions at all. It only means that they would have to be what Husserl calls "pure perceptual fictions", where a pure perceptual fiction is, precisely, a *quasi*-perceptually appearing item that, like the game-monster and the game-sword, does not represent anything beyond itself.[11] According to Husserl, this is the kind of picture-objects we find in the experience of visual art, including the experience of stage performances.

III

I have suggested an answer to the question of what kind of entities game entities are: namely, that they are picture-objects, in the sense of pure perceptual fictions. I now want to turn to the other question contained in the question of their ontological status, the question of their mode of being. I have already indicated my answer to that question: namely, that they are derivatively real. What does this mean?

Somewhat idiosyncratically, I shall say that an entity is *real* just in case it can exist independently of the intentional experiences of a particular agent. And I shall say that it is *irreal* just in case it cannot so exist. Further, an entity is *inherently* real just in case it can exist independently not only of the experiences of a particular agent, but also of the experiences of any agent, or of intentionality in general. And it is *derivatively* real just in case it can exist independently of the experiences of a particular agent, but not of intentionality in general.[12]

Now, game entities are clearly real in the present sense. The monster I fight does not exist only for me, or by virtue of my experiences, but for anyone who is or could be involved in the same game as I am. This is not to say that all the picture-objects that appear on or in the screen during a game are real. Some of then might well be irreal, just like, say, picture-objects appearing in Rorschach-test sheets are. However, precisely on account of their irreality, they would not be game entities in the sense of our guiding characterzation.

But, although real, as picture-objects game entities can only be derivatively real. In order that they exist, there must be intentional experiences whose intentional objects they are: specifically, experiences in which they are seen to appear in, or be depicted by, some picture-thing or other. A physical or perceptual thing, such as the computer-screen and the patches of colour in or through which the game-monster appears does not depend on anyone's experiences for their existence.[13] It could exist even if there were no intentional experiences at all. But the game-monster itself could not exist in the absence of intentional experiences in general. If no-one ever had an intentional experience of the monster, it could not exist.

IV

I want to end by addressing a possible objection to my view of the ontological status of came entities. The objection is that at least some game entities are not derivatively real picture-objects. For at least some game entities are genuine use-objects or artifacts. This is the case with, for example, game-money that may be converted into, say, US dollars according to a fixed exchange rate. These entities are not "like" money. They *are* money, pure and simple.

This objection would be off target. For the view that some game entities are genuine artifacts, which they clearly are, is consistent with the view that all game entities are derivatively real picture-objects.

First, saying that game entities are genuine artifacts is consistent with saying that they are derivatively real. For all artifacts are derivatively real. An artifact is an entity to which we assign a function that it does not inherently have. The artifact is real since it has the function it has independently of whether or not any particular agent recognizes that it has it. Whether or not the pieces of paper in my wallet are money is not up to me. (Were it only so well!) But the reality of artifacts is not inherent, but derivative. For since the function by which it is defined is assigned to it by us, it cannot exist independently of intentional experiences in general. If everyone stopped taking certain items as money, they would no longer be money.

Second, saying that some game entities are genuine artifacts is also consistent with saying that they are picture-objects. For, as we have just seen, an artifact is an entity to which we assign a function it does not inherently have. And in the case of game-artifacts, the entity to which we assign this non-inherent function is not a physical or perceptual entity, but a picture-object of some kind. Consider the example of game-money again. The items to which the function of being a medium of exchange are assigned are not the patches of color or the bit-pattern on the screen. It is not these items themselves that are used in monetary transactions, but the items that appear in them: that is, their associated picture-objects.

1   It is imporant to emphasize that the impossibility of specifying the experiences concerned without specifying something of which they are directed on merely indicate that they are intentional, and does not provide a definition of their intentionality, which, on the view I'm considering, is intrinsic to them. So, far from constituting their intentionality, the impossibility in question is, on this view, a consequence of it.

2   The notion of an intentional object is analogous to that of a grammatical object: Just as to talk of a grammatical object is to talk of that part of the sentence ---

3   What about the screen itself, and the game control? Is there not a sense in which her engagement with them constitutes an integral part of her gaming experience?

4   This is not say that game entities, as appearing intentional objects, and gaming experiences, as the experiences in which they appear, can be exhaustively characterized as a form of pictures and picture-consciousness respectively. It is only to say that whatever else they might be, they are *also*, and *essentially*, a form of pictures and picture-consciousness.

5   [The being lodged in of the picture-object is necessary for the conflict that is a necessary condition for its constitution.]

6   Unlike the picture-thing, the picture-object cannot be physically modified. If I tear part of a photograph, I do not thereby tear part of that which appears in it. The appearing landscape or person are themselves untouched. What happens is only that the way in which the photograph depicts them is impaired.

7   We can imagine the picture-subject modified without imagining the corresponding picture-object modified.

8   Husserl here also talks of "seeing" or "looking into". Cf. Hua 23, 474.

9   My relation to the picture then would be similar to that of a proof-reader to her text.

10   I say "co-constitute" since, even from a phenomenological point of view, these environments involve more than the strict notions of, respectively, a pictorial and a perceptual horizon allow for.

11   Husserl takes the visual arts to be a field of pure perceptual fictions in this sense.

12   Cf. J. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*. See also R. Ingarden, *Time and Modes of Being* and *The Literary Work of Art*.

13   So, the mode of being of picture-objects differ radically from that of picture-things, and at least some picture-subjects (those that are not artefact in a wide sense of the term – but even they will have aspects that are inherently real: namely, the physcial features through which their assigned functions are realized).