

# Postphenomenological Play

Emil Hammar

## Introduction

This paper aims to identify an understanding of digital games in virtual environments<sup>1</sup> by using Don Ihde's (1990) postphenomenological approach to how technology mediates the world to human beings in conjunction with Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1993) notion of play<sup>2</sup>. Through this tentatively proposed amalgamation of theories I point towards an alternative understanding of the relationship between play and game as not only dialectic, but also as socially and ethically relevant *qua* the design and implementation of the game as technology.

At first I outline Ihde's concept of hermeneutical technological mediation and apply it to digital games as technology. Considering that such an application of concepts to digital games requires a working definition of play, I subsequently draw upon Gadamer's notion of play to further understand the relationship between players<sup>3</sup> and digital games as technology. Consequently, I propose an adjusted view on how digital games as technology mediate the world to their players given Gadamer's dialectic notion of play, along with the implications of the paper's proposal. Finally I outline potential objections and future directions of analysis and research for the proposed concepts.

Although it is a challenge to merge these two different theories without doing injustice to their respective concepts, it is my assessment that the theories indicate a potentially rich way of understanding the activity of play through technology.<sup>4</sup> Thus, this paper should be regarded as a theoretical compliment or contribution to how we approach complex phenomena like play and game and their dialectic relationship.

## Technological mediation in the form of digital games

In this section of the paper I delineate and apply the concepts of technological mediation with the purpose of illustrating how these concepts by Ihde (1990) can help us understand how digital games function as technologies and how we as human beings are related to them. In accounting for the variety and complexity of our relationship with technology, Ihde claims that technologies mediate perception in four different relations between human beings and

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper subscribes to Wittgenstein's (2001) view on games as members of a family that share resemblances with one another. Specifically, I focus on a subset of games that meet the condition of occurring in a virtual environment, akin to Calleja (2011). This is done as to demarcate the area of analysis to exclude digital versions of analogue games like poker or solitaire.

<sup>2</sup> Although this paper will not exclusively rely on Gadamer's aesthetics, it is important to note that in my drawing upon his characterization of play one should keep in mind that the hermeneutic aesthetics in Gadamer's view is not a theory of art, but "more a set of practical contemplative notes for enhancing one's encounter with art" (Davey, 2011)

<sup>3</sup> In this paper I use the term player to refer to the human agent engaging the game in question.

<sup>4</sup> While it is challenging, it is not impossible, and when we use different theories to supplement one another, we often get fruitful results, as argued by this paper.

their experienced world. However, due to the scope of this paper, I will only outline and apply one of these relations, namely the hermeneutical technological mediation<sup>5</sup>. This particular relation is understood in the phrasing of Introna as instances in which technologies “functions as an immediate referent to something beyond itself” (Introna, 2011). Such a relation requires that the technology mediates something that needs interpretation by its user in order to constitute a ‘perception’. The formal description of the hermeneutical mediation goes as follows<sup>6</sup>:

*I -> (technology – world)*

The above outline of the hermeneutic relationship illustrates how a human being perceives or experiences the world through a technology. Verbeek cites the example of a thermometer that “reveals one aspect, namely, its [the world’s] temperature” (ibid., p. 126)<sup>7</sup>, thus illustrating how a specific technology informs its user of a state of the world.

When this hermeneutical technological mediation is applied to digital games<sup>8</sup>, we witness the same type of representation of the game’s virtual environment. I.e. the player perceives and interprets the virtual environment through the technology required to execute and present the digital game and its virtual environment in question. Thus, when engaging the game and interpreting its representational signs, the player is exposed to the design and implementation of the digital game. As such, the digital game as a technology affects the player’s interpretation of the referenced virtual environment. As Verbeek points out:

“Many forms of technological mediation are possible that transform our access to the world in myriad ways, some of which open up to us news ways of access unavailable to “naked-eye perception,” and some of which narrow this access. “ (Verbeek, 2005, p. 144)

In this way, the digital game as a designed and implemented technology is able to alter and affect the player’s potential understanding and interpretation of the depicted virtual environment.

However, it should be noted that Ihde claims himself that digital games are not specifically hermeneutic and/or embodied relations, but rather an alterity relation<sup>9</sup>. He states that,

“there is no question of a correspondence between the screen imagining and the real world. The world-on-the-screen is a fictive world that is constructed, not copied. [...] In my earlier human-technology relations terminology, this is an *alterity relation* in which the machinic entity becomes a quasi-other or quasi-world with which the human actor relates.” (Ihde, 2002, p. 81)

Although Ihde understands our engagement with digital games as a form of alterity relation, the above quote seem to rely on a worldview in which some representations correspond to

---

<sup>5</sup> The other three relations are the embodied, alterity and the background relation, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Formalized by Verbeek, 2005, p. 126

<sup>7</sup> Bear in mind that it is not a case of the technology sensing the temperature, but rather a representation of it.

<sup>8</sup> Note that it is certainly possible that the other technological mediations do occur when playing a given digital game, but a treatment of them and an application to digital games is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>9</sup> The alterity relation is characterized in the phrasing of Introna as a relation in which “technology is experienced as a being that is otherwise, different from me, technology-as-other. [...] In my interaction with these technologies they seem to exhibit a ‘world of their own.’” (Introna, 2011)

reality<sup>10</sup> (e.g. a thermometer represents the actual temperature of the world), while other representations are merely constructs (e.g. a digital game represents a virtual environment). However, one could argue that a digital game in which a player enacts the game of e.g. a white male knight battling dragons, partly relates to reality (white male knight) and partly relates to a human construct (dragons), thus indicating that digital games with a virtual environment are not exclusively ‘quasi’ and divorced from reality. In that regard, digital games do draw upon notions of reality, despite their status as virtual objects. Certainly there is a difference between representations in a digital game and representations in scientific models of explanation, but considering how digital games draw upon interpretations of the world, it is difficult to see that they should be classified as entirely constructed quasi-worlds, while scientific models of explanations are not. Thus I find it difficult to see how Ihde is able to plausibly make a non-arbitrary distinction between digital games as representations of ‘quasi-worlds’ and different scientific representations of the world as representations of reality.

Moreover, it is my assessment that hermeneutic relations do occur when we engage a digital game by virtue of the fact that players need to not only interpret the “representational sign” (Calleja, 2011, p. 12) of the game, but also configure the state of the game<sup>11</sup>. Sellinger (2006) also states in ‘Postphenomenology: A Critical Guide to Ihde’ that:

“to play most video games, one must enter into embodied and hermeneutic relations. Without the ability to use a joystick or interpret graphics as significant, the game cannot be effectively played.” (Sellinger, 2006, p. 6)

As such, I claim that it is possible to apply the concept of the hermeneutical mediation to digital games representing a virtual environment<sup>12</sup>.

In summary, the postphenomenological concept of technological mediation in the form of the hermeneutic relation is able to characterize the nature in which digital games mediate their virtual environment to the player. Let us now consider how the activity of play might affect the proposed hermeneutic relation between player and digital game.

### **Play as a dialectic activity between player and game**

It is important to keep the concept of play in mind when applying the above mediating relation to the playing of a digital game, as the way we engage technologies, or specifically digital games, might affect how we understand the technology itself (Verbeek, 2005, p. 136). Although many different suggestions on how to understand play exist<sup>13</sup>, I find that the

---

<sup>10</sup>Such a view on truth, i.e. the correspondence theory of truth, faces some philosophical criticisms, but such a treatment is beyond the scope of this paper. For a critical overview and discussion of the correspondence of truth, cf. David (2013)

<sup>11</sup> Some arguments within games studies corroborate this notion of interpreting and configuring. Cf. Arsenault & Perron (2007), Sicart (2009) and Aarseth (1997, p. 40).

<sup>12</sup> Alternatively, if my argument is required to be in line with Ihde’s claim about digital games constituting an alterity relation, it could be argued that a possible virtual environment exists independently of the enabling technology, thus allowing us to analyze how the virtual environment is hermeneutically mediated to a player.

<sup>13</sup> Among these are Huizinga (1955), Caillois (1961), Ehrman (1968), Dekoven (2002), Schechner (1988), Sutton-Smith (1997), Malaby (2007), and Myers (2010). These different views on the complex phenomenon of

characterization of play made by Gadamer<sup>14</sup> (1993) is relevant for the purposes of this paper, as it helps account for the nuances and complexity of the process of interpreting and configuring a digital game, while keeping in mind the relationship between player and game.

In short, Gadamer posits that play as an activity refers to a constant to-and-fro movement between subject and object, or rather between player and game (Gadamer, 1993, p. 103). This to-and-fro movement between player and game does not refer to either the subject being played or the object being played, but the movement in itself, and thus play cannot be reduced to either the subject who is playing or the object that is being played<sup>15</sup>. Furthermore, during this dialectic movement or process between player and game, it is infeasible to refer to a player as a subject, because “play itself is a transformation of such kind that the identity of the player does not continue to exist for anybody [...] The player (or playwright) no longer exists, only what they are playing (Gadamer, 1993, p. 112). Accordingly, during this dialectic process, the player is subjugated to the game, i.e. the game masters the player:

“all playing is a being-played [...] the real subject of the game is not the player but instead the game itself. What holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there is the game itself.” (Gadamer, 1993, p. 106)

In this way, the player surrenders to the game, as she or he does not play, but is being played. I.e. in a player’s admission to engage and play a given digital game, the player subjects herself to the “rules and structures of the game” (Aarseth, 2007, p. 130), thereby implying that the dialectic process of play is “patterned in various ways. The particular nature of a game lies in the rules and regulations that prescribe the way the field of the game is filled” (Gadamer, 1993, p. 107). This notion of how players are automatically subjected to the game itself also relates to Ihde’s notion of how we, in using technologies, are also used by the technology itself<sup>16</sup>. This particular point is emphasized because it points towards how the design and implementation of digital games as a technology might constrain the player(s) through the game’s rules and structures, i.e. game code (Myers, 2010, p. 16).

However, the subjugation of the player to the game does not entail that it is possible to reduce the activity of playing to the game’s ontological properties themselves:

“like with the game, art is not to be understood by reference to its tools and equipment alone. Art requires materials certainly, and an appreciation of how a specific tool might be used. Yet neither game nor art is constituted by its equipment.” (Davey, 2011)

The claim is therefore not that a game is unable to be reduced to intention, material, or convention, but “rather that each of these elements come into their own when taken up within

---

play all might contribute to further understanding of the concept, but nevertheless covering the fluid and almost indeterminable spectrum of play is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>14</sup> Although Gadamer introduces the concept of play in order to establish his particular hermeneutic aesthetics, it is my assessment that his characterization of play is sufficiently applicable in the domain of game studies, in so far as to further our understanding of what characterizes the activity of play and the relationship between player and game.

<sup>15</sup> “[T]he mode of being of play does not allow the [player] to behave toward play as if toward an object.” (Gadamer, 1993, p. 112)

<sup>16</sup> “What stands out first is that all human-technology relations are two-way relations. Insofar as I use or employ a technology, I am used by and employed by that technology as well.” (Idhe, 2002, p. 137)

the *playing* of the game” (Davey, 2011, his emphasis). This can be exemplified in instances of transgressive play<sup>17</sup> (Aarseth, 2007) and bad play<sup>18</sup> (Myers, 2010), which both indicate that the activity of playing is something more than what the elements of a digital game prescribe.

In summary, I characterize play as a constantly dialectic to-and-fro movement between player and game, in which the player is subjected to the structures of the game that is interpreted by the player, who in turn alters or renews the experience of the game through the act of playing. This activity of play is irreducible to either the player or the structures of the game. With this characterization in mind, let us now turn to combine the proposed concept of hermeneutic technological mediation with Gadamer’s notion of play.

### **Merging dialectic play and technological mediation**

Recalling the application of Ihde’s hermeneutic technological mediation within the domain of digital games and Gadamer’s notion of play as a dialectic process between player and game, it is now possible to establish a model applicable to a digital game:

$$I \leftrightarrow (\text{technology} - \text{world})$$

In our engaging or playing the technology of a digital game it is not only a matter of the depicted virtual environment being mediated, but it also a matter of our playing with the technology and its virtual environment. This new conjunction between the two posited theories are instantiated as a dialectic relationship between player and game in cases of a player engaging a digital game that hermeneutically mediates its virtual environment. Following the to-and-fro movement between player and game, the technology of a digital game is not solely mediating its virtual environment, but the player in turn is also interpreting and reconfiguring the digital game and its environment. As such, this new conceptual model illustrates how the relationship between player and game is dialectic and hermeneutically mediated. Consequently, this approach allows for further understanding and analyzing the relationship between player and digital game as technology, as outlined in the section below.

### **Implications**

Given this new understanding of how play can be seen as a dialectic relationship between player and game mediating a virtual environment, the concept of human-technology relations provide an account of how players engage everyday technology such as digital games “in a manner that can facilitate our considerations of the social and the ethical implications of information technology” (Introna, 2011), e.g. how digital games are designed and implemented might carry certain social and ethical considerations<sup>19</sup>. Additionally, it is

---

<sup>17</sup> “Transgressive play is a symbolic gesture of rebellion against the tyranny of the game, a (perhaps illusory) way for the played subject to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself.” (Aarseth, 2007, p. 132)

<sup>18</sup> Bad play “involves players who break the rules while engaging [...] the game code.” (Myers, 2010, p. 19)

<sup>19</sup> This notion could be argued to be qualified in large part due to Winner’s (1999) notion of intrinsic values in technologies, as well as how their mediating roles “help to shape the way in which human beings are involved with their world and interpret it. Things [...] mediate how human beings are present in their world and how the world is present to them.” (Verbeek, 2005, p. 235)

possible to further analyze how players are able to transgress, through their playing or interpretation and configuration of a given game, the structures of the digital game in question, while also looking into how the game imposes itself upon the player, thereby enabling an analysis of the form of dialectic interdependency between the two. Furthermore, it can be argued that theories which reduce the interpretations and themes of a given game to its basic structures or procedures<sup>20</sup> are insufficient if we want to understand how playing can be an amalgamation of elements between player and game.

In this way, the postphenomenological approach in terms of understanding the hermeneutical mediation of virtual environments makes it possible to analyze the design of a given digital game in the ways it mediates something that needs interpretation, and in turn the interpretation and configuration of the digital game. Just like Ihde's concepts have been applied to determine how technological objects mediate their disclosing of their referenced world<sup>21</sup>, so can the concepts be applied to the design and playing of digital games in virtual environments. This aspect of understanding the hermeneutical mediation of digital games is also beneficial when keeping in mind the earlier point of how players of games (or users of technology) are being played by the game (or used by the technology). Bearing in mind, however, technology does not create one single way of revealing the world (Ihde, 1990, p. 159), but rather cultivates "the proliferation of different ways of seeing within our culture" (Verbeek, 2005, p. 144).

Finally, the approach highlights the ontological status of the depicted virtual environment in a digital game, thereby pointing towards further inquiry into the relationship between enacted experiences within a virtual environment and the status of virtual actions and the virtual world's correspondence, or lack thereof, with reality.

### **Potential objections**

Although the identification of a possible approach to understanding digital games is only made tentatively in this paper, one could raise objections to the validity of the concepts in the following way.

One might object to the delineation of the player and the game as separate entities, thus making the argument that the paper assumes a fallacious subject-object relation. Considering the phenomenological premise of humans always already being in the world, it does not make sense to suggest a distinction between subject and object, or rather player and game. To this, Verbeek meet this objection by emphasizing the fact that the mediation always already constitutes the relationship between subject and object:

"the relation between subject and object always already precedes the subject and object themselves, which implies that the subject and the object are mutually constituted in their interrelation. [...] What humans are and what their world is receive their form by artifactual mediation."(Verbeek, 2005, pp. 129-130)

---

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Flanagan (2009), Swain & Bathwaite (2010), and perhaps to some extent Bogost (2009).

<sup>21</sup> "A hermeneutic technology, after all, provides a representation of reality, which implies that the design of such a technology predetermines which aspect of reality is to be made perceptible by it and in which ways" (Veerbeek, 2005, p. 134)

The subject-object, or player-game, relation does not take epistemological priority over the relation in itself. The mediation between player and game precedes both player and game in the act of playing, as Gadamer in turn also argues (Gadamer, 1993, p. 293), i.e. the mediation or relationship between player and game consists in a mutual constitution of both player and game.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has been an attempt at pointing towards a postphenomenological approach to understand the activity of playing through technology, specifically digital games in virtual environments. I initially introduced Ihde's concept of hermeneutical technological mediation and ascertained how the concept applied to a digital game. To further hone this application I drew upon Gadamer's notion of play to highlight and emphasize how play as an activity is a dialectic to-and-fro movement between player and game. As a result, this emphasis on play as a constant dialectic process altered the mediation between human, technology and virtual environment in terms of analyzing the engagement of games as not only mediating from game to player, but also interpreting and configuring from player to game. Finally, I included a potential objection that might need further investigation. Further inquiry into the application of Ihde's other relations, namely the embodied and the alterity relations, would potentially hone the analytical precision of the concepts and ensure a more stable and holistic assessment of what it entails to play a digital game. It could prove beneficial to investigate and analyze the ways in which games are designed to represent a virtual environment, how it is represented, and whether or not such representations are altered in the playing of them.

### **References**

Arsenault, Dominic, and Bernard Perron. 2009. "In the Frame of the Magic Cycle: The Circle (s) of Gameplay." *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*: 109–131.

Calleja, Gordon. 2011. *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*. MIT Press.

Davey, Nicholas. 2011. "Gadamer's Aesthetics." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. Winter 2011. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/gadamer-aesthetics/>.

David, Marian. 2013. "The Correspondence Theory of Truth." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. Fall 2013. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/ruth-correspondence/>.

DeKoven, Bernie. 2002. *The Well-Played Game: A Playful Path to Wholeness*. Writers Club Press.

Ehrmann, Jacques, Cathy Lewis, and Phil Lewis. 1968. "Homo Ludens Revisited." *Yale French Studies* (41): 31–57.

Flanagan, Mary. 2009. *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. The MIT Press.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 1993. "Truth and Method, 2d. Rev. Ed., Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York." Continuum: 312–24.

Ihde, Don. 1990. *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth*. 560. Indiana University Press.

———. 2002. *Bodies in Technology*. Vol. 5. U of Minnesota Press.

Introna, Lucas. 2011. "Phenomenological Approaches to Ethics and Information Technology." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta. Summer 2011. <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/ethics-it-phenomenology/>.

Malaby, T. M. 2007. "Beyond Play A New Approach to Games." *Games and Culture* 2 (2): 95–113.

Myers, David. 2010. *Play Redux*. University of Michigan Press.

Schechner, Richard. 1988. "Playing." *Play & Culture*.

Selinger, Evan. 2006. *Postphenomenology: A Critical Companion to Ihde*. SUNY Press.

Sharp, John. 2010. "The Mechanic Is the Message: A Post Mortem in Progress." *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values Through Play*: 311–329.

Sicart, Miguel. 2009. *The Ethics of Computer Games*. MIT Press.

Stenros, J., and A. Waern. 2011. "Games as Activity: Correcting the Digital Fallacy." *Videogame Studies: Concepts, Cultures and Communication*. Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxford.

Sutton-Smith, Brian. 1997. *The Ambiguity of Play*. Harvard University Press.

Verbeek, Peter-Paul. 2005. *What Things Do: Philosophical Reflections On Technology, Agency, And Design*. Penn State Press.

Winner, L. 1999. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *The Social Shaping of Technology* 29 (3): 28–40.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig, G. E. M. Anscombe, and Elizabeth Anscombe. 2001. *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text, with a Revised English Translation 50th Anniversary Commemorative Edition*. 3rd ed. Wiley-Blackwell.

Aarseth, Espen. 2007. "I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player." *Situated Play*. *Proc. DiGRA*: 24–28.

Aarseth, Espen J. 1997. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press.