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Analyzing Aesthetics and Experience**

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# Steps towards a Phenomenology of Video Games: Some Thoughts on Analyzing Aesthetics and Experience

JAN-HENDRIK BAKELS

## A. Reaching for an analytical phenomenology: Starting points and obstacles<sup>1</sup>

Let us come straight to the point—this article’s core ambition might seem somewhat paradoxical at first sight. On the one hand, it aims at conceiving a heuristic framework for analyzing a particular video game’s aesthetics as well as the ways in which these aesthetics are experienced by the person playing the game. Hence, with regard to the approached methodology, I will focus on the video game itself as an analytical subject matter—and draw on theoretical premises that follow the principle of generalization to discuss how a particular game might be experienced. On the other hand, I will try to ground the thoughts laid out over the course of this article in a decidedly phenomenological perspective—i.e., a line of thought that locates the idea of any particular experience being subjective<sup>2</sup> at the beginning as well as the center of any philosophical reasoning.

Without wanting to jump into the details of how this paradox is going to be addressed over the following sections at this point—the relationship of tension this twofold ambition creates will neither be solved nor seem solvable by the end of this article. A somewhat systematical methodology that aims at an analytical approach to comparing the aesthetics and experiences that shape the act of playing different video games and a phenomenological theory of what exactly distinguishes the video game experience from other realms of experience will probably never unfold on wholly congruent bases. Thus, I will try to alternate between theoretical reasoning, drawing on phenomenological contributions to film, media and game studies on the one hand and brief analytical sketches that take particular games as inspirations on the other, in order to come to an initial analytical framework for the aesthetic experience of video games. As we will see, I will try to take a particular reading of a crucial concept in neo-phenomenological film theory—namely *intersubjectivity* (Sobchack 1992)—as a vanishing point to keep both lines of thought—the somewhat systematical analysis of video game aesthetics and the phenomenological reasoning on what might serve as key premises to a theory on video game experience—closely aligned though.

For that purpose, I will draw on approaches to video game experience brought up in the field of game studies—may they locate themselves explicitly in a phenomenological line of thought (Bogost 2008; Crick 2011; Klevjer 2012; Čulig et al. 2014; Keogh 2018) or do so more implicitly by discussing aspects of playing video games that seem crucial with regard to subjective experience. As the main point of departure for the thoughts laid out in this article though, I will turn to one of the most influential concepts with regard to the phenomenology of spatio-temporal arts and

media: *kinaesthesia*<sup>3</sup>. After discussing essential early work on the kinaesthetic experience of playing video games (Swalwell 2008) as well as drawing on a phenomenological approach to the intersubjective sharing of affects by means of kinaesthesia conceived within the field of developmental psychology (Stern 2010), I will turn to a series of brief game-analytical sketches that are supposed to highlight certain aspects of experiencing time, space, and materiality while playing video games.

While these steps largely remain within a train of thought that considers neo-phenomenological film theory as something that can be expanded and adapted to produce meaningful insights for the study of video games, this article's final section will come back to the question how what will be reasoned by then might be further elaborated by explicitly taking the grave and obvious differences between film and video games into account—and will take another brief game-analytical observation as a point of reflection for doing so.

This very last aspect—the commonalities film and video game share as well as the differences that clearly distinguish the two—eventually provides me with the opportunity to add two important clarifications with regard to the limits of the approach outlined over the following sections: First, the scope of what can be discussed about any certain work of art or media in terms of aesthetic experience is—of course—potentially limitless. Hence, whenever I will refer to 'the' aesthetic experience of video games within this article, this will be in full awareness that only a very limited, particular approach to audiovisual aesthetics outlined in the theoretical sections of this article will be addressed—and that there are plenty of aesthetic features and aspects of the video games under discussion that are just as worthy looking at. Second, the use of the term *video game* (as opposed to *computer game*) throughout this article represents a deliberate choice. I chose it not with regard to the technical media referred to (e.g., gaming console vs. personal computer) but as a means to point out that I am fully aware of the very different technological developments, genealogies as well as art, media and scholarly traditions that contribute to the complex and downright unlimited scope of subject matter we assemble under the term *computer* resp. *video games*. Against this backdrop, I will use the term *video games* to account for the fact that all the games taken as examples throughout this article—in my understanding—share the fact that they feature a visual image space that can, in a rather broad sense, still be grasped as a cinematic image space—i.e., an audiovisual expression of time and space.

I will get back to what implications and perspectives this limited scope in itself might point to in the concluding section. But first, let us start by looking at theoretical approaches to the phenomenology of video games.

## **B. Gateways towards a Phenomenology of Playing Video Games: Kinaesthesia and Affect**

Most readers will probably be familiar with phenomenology's core theoretical concept as well as main point of reference—*experience*, not as in 'experience gathered' but with regard to literally experiencing the present moment (and its intimate ties to the immediate past and future [Husserl 1985, pp. 225-228]) as a subjective, embodied

human being that senses, feels, and thinks. If we consider the actual experience of playing video games at the core of all related discourses, a systematical methodology aiming at analyzing video game experience offers the potential to produce substantial contributions to—among others—the study of video gaming as a cultural practice, the rhetorical dimension of video games as acts of communication or the political and ideological aspects of particular games and gaming as a practice.

So far, most approaches to the phenomenology of video games rather highlight certain aspects of the experience of playing these games than aiming at a holistic phenomenology of video games. Brendan Keogh's *A Play of Bodies* (2018)—concerned with several key concepts of phenomenology like embodiment, feeling and intentionality—stands out as the most comprehensive approach to video game phenomenology to date. Rune Klevjer (2012) discusses in detail the phenomenology of the player-avatar relation, while Timothy Crick (2011) takes Vivian Sobchack's (2004) categorical distinction between cinematic and electronic image spaces as a starting point to reflect on a genuine subjectivity the act of video gaming entails as an experience. Benjamin Čulig, Marko Katavić, Jasenka Kuček, and Antonia Matković (2014) produce a study of video gamer's experiences by means of interviews and qualitative research. Last but not least, Ian Bogost (2008) takes speculative realism as a point of departure for an intriguing deep dive into how the video game experience might be conceived from the computer's point of view. I will get back to most of these approaches to video game phenomenology over the course of this article. But first, as announced above, I would like to draw on an approach to kinaesthesia—i.e., the aesthetics of movement—as well as a particular contribution from an art- and media-oriented theory originating in the field of developmental psychology in order to discuss theoretical premises that might produce insights into what particular experiences we attribute to the perception of particular sequences of gaming from an analytical perspective.

Over the last three decades, discourse in the multidisciplinary field of game studies has generated all kinds of research perspectives, questions, models, and results. Hence, any attempt to qualify this field as a whole or even differentiate its main lines of discourse seems doomed to fail—or least to retreat to rude oversimplifications. I will therefore refrain from trying to give any kind of encompassing overview but rather start with the observation—or claim, one might say—that, due to the disciplines and perspectives shaping the game studies discourse over the first or first one and a half decade(s), the perceptive qualities of video games as a medium were either neglected or rather peripheral amendments with regard to discussions on how games convey *stories* (Domsch 2013), are structured as a set of *rules* (Juul 2011) or how the act of gaming has to be seen as revolving around the concept of mediated *action* (Galloway 2006)—just to name some essential research perspectives. Nevertheless, over the past one and a half decades more and more contributions to game studies—some inspired by phenomenology, some not—have started to take a closer look at video game aesthetics as well as how these aesthetics are perceived and experienced. One concept that has emerged among these contributions is of particular importance with regard to the line of thought laid out in this article—for it offers a possibility to relate existing approaches to video game experience in the field of game studies on the one hand to the larger field of phenomenology as well as a vast field of theories and models on the aesthetic experience of spatio-temporal arts and media on the other hand—: namely the concept of *kinaesthesia*.

The perhaps most intriguing approach to date with regard to kinaesthesia in video games in my view remains Melanie Swalwell's *Movement and Kinaesthetic Responsiveness—A Neglected Pleasure* (2008). In this article, Swalwell conceives the video game image as a mobile gaze to which the gamers' perception sort of adapts (2008, pp. 75-77). Referring to the moving 'camera' in first-person-3D games and drawing on anecdotes as striking as familiar to gamers that concern balancing movements performed by the players themselves in front of the screen in order to counter and compensate for (obviously non-existent) centrifugal forces while playing racing games, Swalwell discusses phenomena of *sensing* movement that solely arise from *perceiving* movement. By extending these thoughts toward an approach to an embodied process of *becoming*, she proceeds to unfold the idea of the act of playing video games being characterized by a bodily in-between-state, generated by a perceptive intertwining of gamer and game that culminates in a modified experience of the gamer's body, an altered feeling of being embodied:

As a practice, gaming sustains a tension between different kinds of bodies, and the spaces through which these move. By bodies, I'm talking about material *and* virtual bodies *and* the negotiations between these different sorts of bodies. Such negotiations can produce new ways of being, new spatial negotiations, new orientations, different affects (2008, pp. 84-85).

Following Swalwell, the experience of playing video games is shaped by a complex interrelation of perceived bodies within different spaces, while this interrelation is being experienced as "new ways of being"—or as we might say in phenomenological terms: specific experiences of *subjectivity* on the part of the gamer. These "material and virtual bodies", in turn, arise from kinaesthetic perception.

These thoughts provide a fundamental orientation for a phenomenology of video games—they pave the way to understanding the specific experiences of subjectivity video games as media provide and, by referring to kinaesthesia as the center of gaming experience, suggest an aesthetic concept these experiences of subjectivity are grounded in that is suitable for the analysis of particular games from a phenomenological perspective. Nevertheless, we cannot simply refer to different levels of movement in the act of playing a certain game in order to get a hold on the constellation of 'bodies' the act of playing a certain game generates. Kinaesthesia as a concept not only refers to the mere perception of something moving, but rather to the experiential, affective qualities of *being moved* by the embodied perception of expressive movements performed by others (Müller and Kappelhoff 2018, pp. 129-182). If we want to get closer to being able to qualify the experience of playing certain games from a phenomenological perspective, we therefore need a theory that accounts for the phenomenon of actually feeling a movement other than the movement of our own biological body.

We can find such a theory by turning to the concept of *vitality affects* by the late developmental psychologist Daniel N. Stern (2010). In his early work, Stern did extensive research on the mother-child interrelation (1977), focusing specifically on a phenomenological reading of their interactions (1991). Within this context, he developed a theory of interaffective 'finetuning' between mother and child that is based on kinaesthetic perception. In short, Stern states that mother and child communicate—and moreover, share—affective states via the temporal shape of

facial expressions, gestures and noises—the latter being conceived as kinaesthetic sound gestures in a broader sense. Yet, ‘communicate’ is actually a misleading term, because this process is not thought to be based on gestures serving as signs. It is the temporal expressivity of these gestures that is less understood, than rather felt by the mother—and the child in turn—as an affective quality, based on embodied kinaesthetic perception. Following Stern, these kinaesthetic gestures are as well rooted in and perceived as vitality affects (Stern 2010) that are exchanged between mother and child—i.e., affective experiences that allow for a more or less first-hand feeling of other’s affective states based on the kinetic forces we attribute to the temporal shape and rhythm of our counterpart’s movements. Accordingly, this process differs from phenomena like emotional contagion (Barsade 2002) or affective mimicry (Voodla et al. 2020). Stern does not refer to a fixed set of basic emotions (see Frijda 1986) like fear, anger, love, sadness and so on that is being conveyed kinaesthetically, but rather affective *intensities*—which is important within the context of this article because it allows for more or less any movement to express a certain kinetic energy that can be felt by those observing the movement as a particular affective dynamic. Based on their temporal unfolding, the affective quality of various expressive gestures is described by Stern in a wide array of adjectives—like ‘explosive’, ‘tense’, ‘smooth’ and so on (2010, pp. 3-56).

In the course of his research, Stern went on to root our experience of the present moment in this kinaesthetic mode of perception (2004)—in accordance with Edmund Husserl’s (1985) phenomenology of time. And in his late works, Stern argued that artistic practices like dance, theatre, and film are defined by what he, following his term of vitality affects, called *forms of vitality* (2010, pp. 75-98). In this regard, Stern’s theory can be seen as a contribution from developmental psychology, pointing towards one of the central academic concepts with regard to the arts within the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—the interdisciplinary discourse on *expressive movement* with contributions from the fields of anthropology (Plessner 1982), psychology (Wundt 1880) as well as film studies (Münsterberg 2013; Eisenstein 2006), with all of these approaches reflecting a broad range of artistic approaches to dance, theatre, and film (Kappelhoff 2004).

If we take together Swalwell’s thoughts on kinaesthesia, Stern’s concept of vitality affects, and the idea of a whole range of spatio-temporal arts and media’s aesthetics being rooted in the concept of expressive movement, we can come up with a heuristic hypothesis regarding the analysis of video games from a phenomenological perspective: *By analyzing different ‘bodies’—may they be represented explicitly or rather implicitly be perceived due to the games’ perspective, patterns of interaction, etc.—, the kinaesthetic qualities of the way these bodies move, and eventually the interplay of these different bodies, we should be able to qualify specific experiences of being-in-the-world these games generate.* This hypothesis is heuristic in several ways—one of them being the fact that at this point of our reasoning we are still lacking the discussion of phenomenological approaches to mediated subjectivity. But before we dive deeper into the question of subjectivity and related theory, I would first like to examine the hypothesis stated above over the course of a few analytical sketches.

## C. Bodies in Motion: Kinaesthesia and Virtual Materiality in Video Games

The following analytical sketches aim at taking the kinaesthetic perspective on video games unfolded within the last section as a starting point to reflect upon the experiential qualities the discussed video games display, how we experience the (virtual) worlds these games bear by means of kinaesthesia, as well as gathering some first insights into the question of subjectivity (which will be discussed further within the last section of this article). I will take my own experiences of playing these games as a point of reference and draw on research in film and game studies in order to deepen the understanding of the experiential phenomena discussed.

### *Tetris*

The game *Tetris* (Nintendo 1989)<sup>4</sup> is probably one of the best-known games in video game history. The main part of the screen resembles a two-dimensional vessel (see image 1); from the top of the screen, the famous *tetraminos*—i.e., little rock-like objects consisting of four squares arranged in all possible geometrical variations—one by one descend with a steady speed (that increases level by level), while the player has to arrange them to create as many full-length horizontal lines as possible in order to make the lines disappear and prevent the vessel from filling to the top of the screen (at which point the game is over). From a ludological perspective, *Tetris* is a logic game based on the combination of a simple 2D-geometry and time pressure—no avatar (hence no represented bodies), no complex world-building, no apparent fiction.

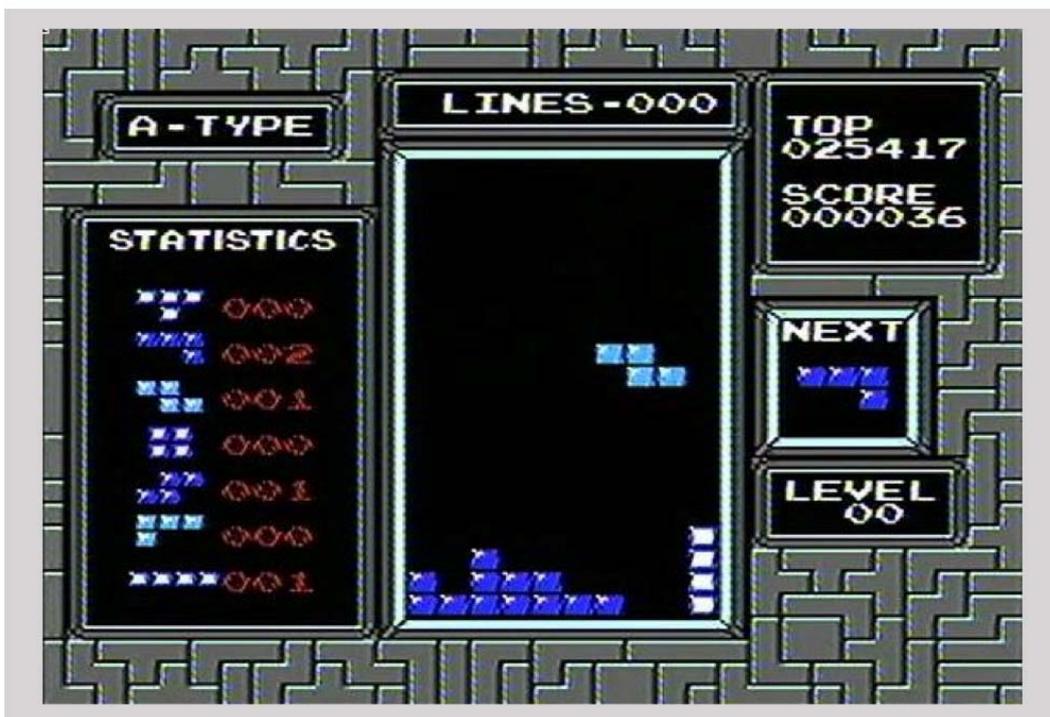


Image 1: Still from *Tetris* (Nintendo 1989)

Nevertheless, in my experience even playing *Tetris* comes with certain rather felt than understood qualities—and the ‘feel’ of a very genuine world, intimately tied to a specific experience of subjectivity. To me, this ‘feel’ of playing *Tetris* mainly derives from sensing the materiality of the tetraminos, from experiencing their weight in some way every time they come to a halt. And for some reason, the longer I play the game I kind of lose the capacity for feeling the spatial extent of my own body, instead feeling it (not actually, but gradually) replaced by sensing the continuous impact of little objects hitting the ground—like a rocky, material rain—rather inside than outside of me. After a long session of *Tetris*, the session’s aftermath is characterized by almost feeling like I *am* the vessel in which I had to arrange these little rocks, still feeling the continuous rhythm of countless impacts. But how can we account for these experiences on a theoretical level?

Actually, the feeling of the tetraminos’ weight is quite in line with one of film studies’ most influential theories on audiovisual perception. Composer and film scholar Michel Chion (1994) has suggested the concept of *synchresis* (1994, p. 63) to account for the phenomenon of visual and auditive events that are witnessed happening synchronously to be perceived as a coherent audiovisual *gestalt* with certain sensible qualities (think of the gut-smacking gunshots in James Cameron’s *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* [1991], that have next to nothing in common with the actual sound of a fired shotgun but are rather the result of layering all kinds of explosive sounds in the process of sound design and the very perceptual effect Chion calls synchresis). If we consider Chion’s notion of synchresis with regard to my experience of playing *Tetris*, the simple combination of a continuous movement (that of a single tetramino descending) coming abruptly to a halt on the one hand, and the crunchy sound resembling an electronic bass drum that is displayed each and every time at this very moment on the other hand, creates the felt sensation of an actual impact, which in turn—retroactively, if you will—lets us sense a kinetic force behind the tetraminos’ descend; the visual perception of a certain temporal shape of movement—characterized by its offset in this case—and the auditive perception of a specific sound together create an impression of *weight* as sort of a synesthetic surplus. Since the movements of the tetraminos are always moving in a steady pace that is also steady across all tetraminos moving within a certain level of the game, the impression of weight in *Tetris* more or less lacks relativity—i.e., playing *Tetris*, I do not experience the tetraminos as having a *specific* weight but rather experience a *general feeling of weightiness* attached to the tetraminos’ impact.

With regard to the experience of subjectivity that characterizes playing *Tetris* for me—the gradual loss of the sensation of being an embodied human being and its being replaced by the sensation of becoming a more or less bodyless interiority shaken by continuous ‘rocky’ rain myself—we can have a first quick look into Vivian Sobchack’s neo-phenomenological theory on embodied experience in the cinema (1992; we will get back to this within the next section). Following Sobchack, the cinematic moving image is neither to be conceived as a text, nor a set of visual and auditive signs, nor even a photographic *representation* of space, situation or action; in resembling<sup>5</sup> perception in everyday life with regard to the perceptual coordinates of a located, embodied experience of seeing and hearing, the cinematic image—with Sobchack—can be conceived as an audiovisual gaze, constantly moving and shifting, making the cinematic image an expression of expression and a perception of perception at the same time (1992, pp. 3-13). By engaging with this audiovisual

gaze—or with Sobchack: the sensing subject the cinematic image itself is perceived to be—the viewer enters a twofold subjectivity, not completely suspending their bodily being-in-the-world, but also engaging with the film's 'perception' in a way that gradually suspends the idea of the film's gaze being the gaze of somebody else—and reduces the fact of actually having a body to 'lending' (Voss 2006) this body to the cinematic subject of the audiovisual gaze. This state of ambiguity, being-in-between, or being-with ultimately leads to the phenomenon of sensing the kinetic and rhythmic<sup>6</sup> dynamics shaping the particular cinematic images as a subjective being-in-motion and interior rhythms on the part of the viewer, generating specific affective experiences (Bakels 2017).

If we heuristically assume that this phenomenological perspective on audiovisual images in the cinema can be made fruitful with regard to digital video game images as well,<sup>7</sup> we might even see the simple two-dimensional image in *Tetris* as a situated, perceptive being-with a mediated experience of being-in-the-world—which lacks any encompassing body or represented bodies (other than the tetraminos as influenceable objects) as well as any kinaesthetics of the whole, letting us players experience ourselves as disembodied, immovable subjects shaken by the never-ending drumming of little impacts. But what might happen to this two-dimensional scenario if we add a represented body we feel attached to in some way—i.e., an avatar?

### ***Super Mario World***

The *Super Mario* series is probably right next to *Tetris* in terms of fame and popularity. *Super Mario World* (Nintendo 1990) marks the start of the second phase of Mario's 2D-period—after several 8bit appearances on the NES and Game Boy systems and before the switch to third-person 3D with *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo 1996). Entering and switching in between several levels through a map displayed in a canted aerial perspective, players steer Mario within the levels from left to right through two-dimensional stages in front of multilayered backgrounds, with most levels allowing to go back and forth and some creating the additional pressure of the 'camera' moving constantly and autonomously from left to right and endangering Mario of losing a life by being left behind. The eponymous world of the game—as practically all games within the main series—consists of ground, water, abysses, pipes, all kinds of stable and moving platforms, as well as obstacles and enemies that threaten to take one of Mario's lives if touched by the avatar.

With the *Super Mario* series being presumably the best-known representative for the *Jump'n'Run* genre, it is probably known to or at least expectable for most readers that playing *Super Mario World* mostly entails running and jumping while trying not to fall into abysses, not to run into deadly objects or enemies, and discovering sometimes hidden, sometimes hard-to-reach paths and items. Given the significance of being able to skillfully move the avatar—and of its capabilities to move—*Super Mario World* stands out in the series' history for adding to the 'classic' incarnations Mario can switch to via collectable items—the default 'Small Mario', turned either into a larger 'Big Mario' by collecting a mushroom or a fire-throwing big Mario by collecting a 'fire flower'—two new variants: 'Cape Mario'—a big Mario with a super-hero-like cape that can extend jumps by spinning mid-air—and of course Yoshi—a

little dinosaur Mario can ride on that makes it possible to ‘eat’ items and enemies but in turn decreases the height of jumps.

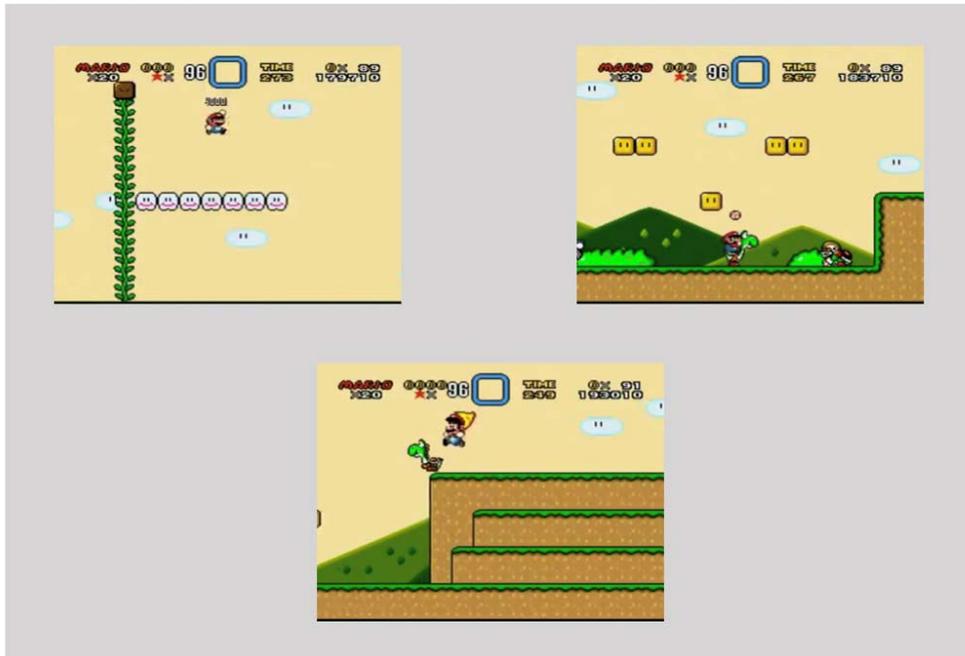


Image 2: Stills from *Super Mario World* (Nintendo 1990)

Against this background, my own embodied experience of *Super Mario World* boils down to a single observation: the experience of a slightly distorted, unstable sense for the weight of my own body after long sessions of playing the game. What part of playing *Super Mario World* messed (and sometimes still messes) with the sense for my own bodyweight?

As already mentioned, Mario can switch between several incarnations, each displaying different capabilities of moving through the game’s world (see image 2). These capabilities—in terms of the (crucial) ability to master difficult jumps—are not ‘realistically’ matched with regard to the represented body each Mario-incarnation entails—for example the heavier ‘Big Mario’ does not jump less high than ‘Small Mario’, the appearance of ‘Cape Mario’, the game’s best jumper, is not slimmer or smaller than ‘Big Mario’ or ‘Fire Flower Mario’. Nevertheless, each incarnation has its own movement quality while jumping (and landing—for example ‘Small Mario’ tends to drift way longer after landing than the other ones); the jumps each incarnation performs each have a specific shape of progression—that could be described in terms of the synthetic production of electronic sounds in music production: each has its own characteristic path of attack, sustain, and decay. It is exactly this quality of movement, not the representation of Mario’s respective body, that *changes the way Mario’s weight feels* while playing the game—the almost floating, elegantly accelerating movement of ‘Cape Mario’ jumping, the symmetrical shape and powerful movement of ‘Small’ or ‘Big Mario’ jumping, the floating but seemingly never-accelerating short jumps while riding Yoshi.

In a way, the experience of weight in *Super Mario World* expands the complexity of the similar but different experience with regard to *Tetris*’ tetraminos: The impression of the object on the screen having a distinct weight does not primarily derive from

what Chion calls *synchresis* here (although the famous *Super Mario* jumping sounds of course add to the temporal shape of each Mario-incarnation's jumps in a way that probably amplifies the sense of weight generated by the quality of movement); here it is primarily the spatio-temporal shape of jumping movements that literally shapes an impression of weightiness. Moreover, it is the different aesthetic figurations of weightiness the game offers that introduce what lacked in the case of *Tetris*—*the sense of weightiness* being combined with the *sensation of a relativity of actual weight*.

In addition, our relation to Mario as an object within the game's image space is totally different from the one we have to the tetraminos in *Tetris*. While the latter appear and are being discarded in rapid succession, Mario is the one and only object that lets us intervene and interact with the game's world from its beginning to its end. It is this particular form of *kinaesthetic alignment*, I would argue, rather than Mario's anthropomorphic features, that intertwines the sensations deriving from Mario's movement with our capabilities to sense introspections and body image (this observation of video games resp. the kinaesthetics of the avatar enabling altered body images also seems compatible with the way Rune Klevjer (2012) takes phenomenology as a starting point to conceive avatars as prosthetic body extensions). As a hypothesis with regard to avatar-centered 2D games and drawing on Timothy Crick's phenomenological approach to the embodiment of a third-person 3D game (2011, pp. 261-262), we could say that in the case of 2D games, we do not experience the avatar's movements as our body's movements in terms of spatiality, but nevertheless experience the kinaesthetic quality of the avatar's movements as related to our own embodied being-in-the-world—leading to a first-hand experience of shifting bodily weight in the case of *Super Mario World*. The constant back and forth—sometimes switching between three or four incarnations in as little as 20 seconds—between different sensations of weight provides the player with an experience impossible in everyday life: the experience of sensing one's own body weight as variant and rapidly changing.

This analytical sketch expands our insights on the interrelation of audiovisuality, kinaesthesia and (virtual) materiality gained while discussing *Tetris*: Looking at *Super Mario World* from a phenomenological perspective, we can assume that kinaesthetic qualities not only convey embodied experiences of materiality by means of a kinetically grounded synesthesia—they also seem to have a direct influence on how we experience our own body while playing certain video games. But how does this aspect play out, if we experience video game images—as already discussed above in reference to Melanie Swalwell's (2008) thoughts on kinaesthesia in video games—as a direct experience of being in motion ourselves, like in third- or first-person 3D games?

### ***Grand Turismo Sport***

The *Gran Turismo* series, started on Sony's first PlayStation in 1997, consists of several 3D race driving simulations whose single player campaign follows a simple formula that the series' latest game *Gran Turismo Sport* (Polyphony Digital 2017) still sticks to: with the game offering all kinds of real world cars, players start with a budget that allows for the acquisition of an average middle class car; from there on,

races and extensive race series are to be won in order to gain the credits to step by step buy and upgrade all kinds of faster cars, ultimately enabling players to buy varying professional race cars and partake in races that can take up to 24 hours in real time. On this path, different kinds of cars open up the possibility to partake in different races on different raceways—with the most basic difference between raceways being that between asphalt and rally tracks. From the different aspects the experience of playing racing simulations in general and *Gran Turismo Sport* in particular draws on, it is particularly this difference between racing asphalt and rally speedways (see image 3) that is going to be of importance for this brief analytical sketch.

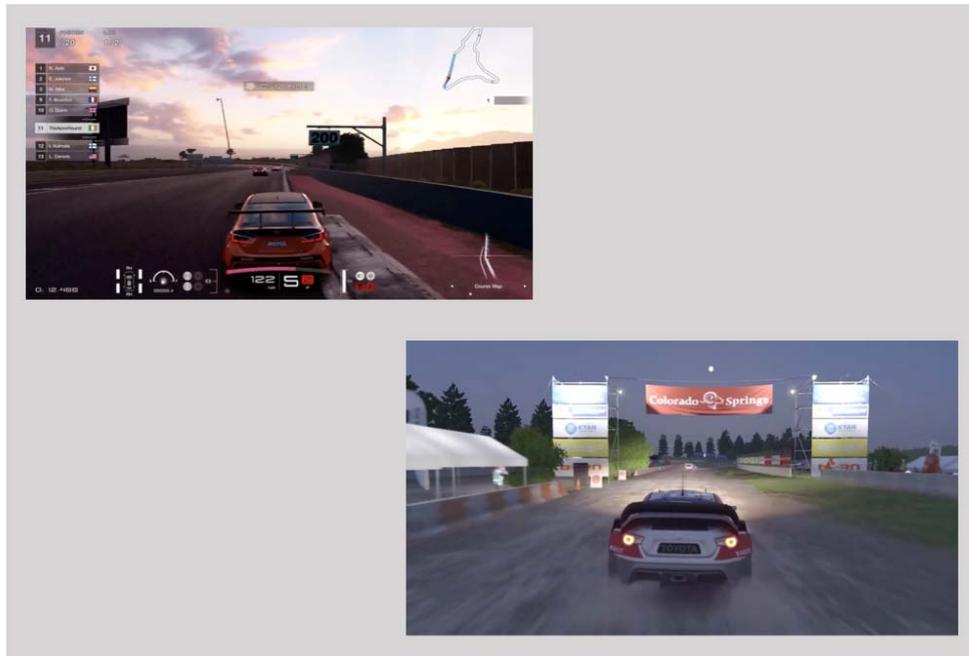


Image 3: Stills from *Gran Turismo Sport* (Polyphony Digital 2017)

But let us start more general: To me, the experience of playing *Gran Turismo Sport* is characterized by my being-in-the-world as a human body that can move and interact with the world physically in certain ways gradually being suspended and exchanged for the feeling of being a somewhat disembodied, purely kinetic force. After playing the game for longer sessions, it takes a while for the feeling of being a ‘constant push forward’ myself to wear off—while at the same time, I maintain a heightened sensibility for my own moving through space being either rather smooth or laborious.

The first part of this experience—being a disembodied, purely kinetic urge or drive instead of an embodied human being—can be grasped quite easily on a theoretical level. In film studies, the phenomenon of the *movie ride* (Balides 2003)—referring to film sequences characterized by a fast camera movement forward—is discussed with regard to immersion in the cinema, on the part of the viewers pointing towards experiences of being in motion themselves while watching these sequences. Within film studies, the immersive effect of these *movie ride* sequences is attributed to them serving as first-person point-of-view (POV) shots within the larger sequences’ succession of shots. Cinema’s capacities of displaying movement through a given space are aligned with the perceptual coordinates of moving in real life, therefore triggering bodily reactions on the part of the viewers. In this regard, these sequences

can serve as a threshold phenomenon that lets become observable what neo-phenomenological film theory—as we have discussed with Vivian Sobchack’s (1992) idea of a two-fold subjectivity that characterizes the cinematic experience—claims to be the case for all cinematic images, POV or not: their kinetic and rhythmic aspects being sensible on a bodily level while watching a film.

With regard to *Grand Turismo Sport* and this article’s line of thought, the notion of the *movie ride* effect seems almost redundant—we have already encountered a similar understanding of moving forward within the perceptual coordinates of first-person vision while discussing Melanie Swalwell’s (2008) article on kinaesthesia and video games. In a similar way, Rune Klevjer (2012) has argued that the camera movement in first-person 3D games “re-locates the player’s bodily self-awareness [...] into screen space” (2012, pp. 1-2). Finally, Timothy Crick’s (2011) discussion on whether and how Vivian Sobchack’s idea of the audiovisual gaze in cinema leading to the experience of a cinematic subject (other than ourselves as well as a given film’s characters) can be extended towards the idea of a game subject (other than the player, avatar or non-playable characters) experienced while playing video games emphatically makes the case for doing so—explicitly assuming this to be the case for first- and third-person 3D games (2011, p. 261). Nevertheless, the aesthetic experience of playing *Gran Turismo Sport* offers another insight going beyond the kinaesthetic resonances of—following Crick—the subjectivity of the Renaissance perspective being put in motion.

This insight is directly tied to the difference between asphalt and rally raceways in the game already noted above. On the one hand—in a way quite similar to what we observed with regard to *Super Mario World*—the different movement qualities associated with both kinds of raceways play out as different experiences of weight. The cars on rally raceways (and, like in Mario’s case, with them the player’s sense for their own body weight)<sup>8</sup> are experienced as heavier than the cars on asphalt raceways—no matter how heavy the cars are supposed to be with regard to the car’s statistics and the game’s respective physics. On the other hand, the different movement qualities—fast, smooth, and stable on asphalt vs. frictionous, shaky, and drifting on rally raceways—are experienced as some kind of *touch*, letting me sense the texture of the respective raceway’s surface. This experience of ‘touching’ is similar to Laura U. Marks’ (2002) approach to the sensation of touch being a synesthetic experience attached to the visual perception of texture in cinema—only that in the case of playing *Gran Turismo Sport*, this synesthetic surplus is not so much based on visual perception of surfaces but rather on a synesthetic expansion of kinaesthetic perception.

With regard to the phenomenology of video games, this observation leads to an almost trivial but consequential insight: We have already seen that ‘our’ audiovisual movements (i.e., movements of avatars or the ‘camera’ view itself as a stand-in for an avatar) in video games convey way more than representations of (pragmatic) actions with regard to the rules of the respective game—for example subjective experiences of one’s own weight. Now we can assume that perceiving these movements can generate an experience of relationality, a kinaesthetic feeling that generates the subjective experience of a particular ‘body-while-playing’, while at the same time entailing a feeling for the materiality of the virtual world in which this movement takes place. This *kinaesthetic touch*—in the full meaning of the

phenomenological notion of being-in-the-world—enables us to experience a particular self that is intimately tied to the world we immerse ourselves in.

Throughout the first three analytical sketches, we have gathered insights on how kinaesthesia in video games relates to embodied sensations with regard to objects within a game's world, different experiences of (dis)embodied subjectivity (that can be more closely associated with the phenomenology of an avatar's body or—as in the case of *Tetris*—not associated to an avatar at all), as well as conveying sensations with regard to the materiality of the virtual world the game takes place in. Of course, these different aspects are not isolated features; the experience of a particular game is always integral—often drawing on all the phenomena discussed so far simultaneously. Taken together, these phenomena can open a path to studying the poetics of complex video games from a phenomenological perspective. Hence, for our last analytical sketch, I will try to at least briefly hint at the potential for an analytical reconstruction of a video game's poetics within a phenomenological framework.

### ***Red Dead Redemption 2***

As a last step in our succession of analytical sketches, I want to bring into focus one of the most dominant video game genres with regard to current high-end video game productions: 3D open world games. Drawing on a rather long genealogy within video game history, the open world genre—i.e., games that feature a virtual world whose places players can traverse more or less in their own time, succession, and path, without having to stick to a predefined, linear order of events—<sup>9</sup>set off on its path to becoming one of the most dominant and popular video game genres with the genre's turn to third- (or nowadays even first-) person 3D images. And—as far as history goes—even though Nintendo had already made that leap with the N64 versions of its *Zelda* and *Super Mario* series during the late 1990s (as had Sega with 1999s critically acclaimed *Shenmue*), the game most commonly known as the 'mother' of all current 3D open world games happens to be *Grand Theft Auto III* (Rockstar North 2001), propelling the rise of the Rockstar Games studio behind it to one of the biggest game design studios and publishers as well as serving more or less as a template for several of the highest-grossing game series of our time.

But choosing the 3D open world genre as a final subject matter for this section is neither motivated by economic or cultural dominance, nor by the imminent increase of complexity this change of subject matter implies—3D open world games almost have taken on the status of meta games, integrating all kinds of other genres into their worlds by means of varying quest designs, extensive chains of side-quests, or even video games within the video game. Rather, this choice of subject matter is motivated by the insights we gained while discussing *Gran Turismo Sport*—the potential of video games to let us experience our being-in-the(-virtual)-world by means of some sort of kinaesthetic touch, generating sensible perceptions of our body-while-gaming as well as a feeling for the virtual world's materiality. Against this backdrop, I want to take a closer look at Rockstar Games latest production *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018)—for most of the acclaim it received by video game critics is accompanied by praise for the way it puts the world it is set in at the center of players' experiences.<sup>10</sup>

Like already mentioned with regard to 3D open world games in general above, there is no short way of addressing ‘the gameplay’ of *Red Dead Redemption 2* in detail. Its story set in the last years of what is known as the times of America’s ‘Wild West’ or the ‘American Frontier’, the game follows a bunch of outlaws—one of them, Arthur Morgan, serving as the players’ avatar throughout most of the game—and includes all kind of different main quests, side quests, and optional activities. Therefore, let me start this last analytical sketch by focusing on a particular one of these optional activities—i.e., the possibility of hunting deer (and other animals) in the games vast, open world by means of a little ‘scene description’:

I am travelling in between missions from one town to another. Everything takes place in third-person 3D—i.e., I am watching a video game screen displaying the backside of my avatar riding a horse in the image’s center front in broad daylight, with the image as a whole locating the avatar riding somewhere in the middle of a vast, slightly dried-out meadow towards a mountain chain covered with trees under a cloud-splattered blue sky clearly visible on the horizon. Occasional green bushes, trees and grey rocks of all sizes are scattered across the meadow, sometimes forcing me to direct my riding avatar slightly left or right in order to avoid these obstacles. While somehow meditatively following my avatar’s horse’s bobbing up and down movements and the familiar rhythm of galloping sounds, I detect movement beside one of the trees halfway between me and the mountain chain. I assume the distant light brown spot moving there to be some kind of animal. I adjust my avatar’s course in order to ride right towards the tree with the moving object next to it. Before I get to close, I let the avatar descend from the horse’s back and continue by foot. The sound of my avatar advancing further by running towards the tree is significantly different now; the soft, rattling sounds of the equipment my avatar carries are drowned out by the rhythm of crunchy sounds made by each and every one of my avatar’s steps, with the steps’ sounds varying, sounding a little bit crunchier while my avatar runs faster or enters sandy, all dried-out parts of the yellowish meadow. Before getting too close to the tree, I open the game’s inventory system and apply a unit of cover scent, allowing me to get close to animals without getting noticed too soon. Continuing, I let my avatar switch to a crouching posture, now tiptoeing towards the tree, with the rhythm of crunchy stepping sounds significantly slowing down and becoming more silent, giving way to a bird’s calls in the distance. I let the avatar stop for a moment, select the binoculars from the game’s inventory system and check what exactly is moving besides the tree I have been approaching. Now clearly able to see a deer, a little caption popping up in the bottom right corner of the screen tells me I have encountered a whitetail buck. I let the avatar stash away the binoculars and continue crouching right through a cluster of little green bushes, triggering a short, swelling rustle every time my avatar’s shoulder brushes one of the bushes. Finally, having gotten rather close to the whitetail buck, I let my avatar take cover behind one of the scattered rocks. I open the game’s weapon system and choose bow and arrow. I press and keep pressed the button for aiming and see my avatar rise slightly above the rock’s edge. I let the avatar sneak closer to the buck (see image 4). I correct the aim by adjusting the ‘camera’ until the little white dot in the screen’s center turns red and covers the buck’s shoulder region. Still keeping the button for aiming pressed, I press and keep pressed the button for drawing the bows string, triggering a tense sound. With the little red spot seemingly in the right place, I let go of the button for drawing the string. A hissing sound is triggered, instantly followed by a smacking sound that leads to the buck falling over and collapsing while delivering a last,

desperate roar. Everything is silent again, apart from the birdcalls in the distance. I let the avatar get up from the crouching posture, slowly approach the buck with the familiar, crunchy stepping sounds and—by pushing the respective button—start a little animated sequence showing my avatar skinning the buck, ending with another little pop-up caption telling me I have acquired the bucks pelt and meat. I push the button that lets my avatar whistle for his horse in order to continue my travels.



Image 4: Still from *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games 2018)

This little ‘scene description’ provides us with plenty of possibilities to apply and combine what we have gathered in terms of insights, analytical perspectives and concepts in the course of the previous analytical sketches:

Most obviously, the game features an avatar.<sup>11</sup> As we have seen while discussing *Super Mario World*, this avatar—or more specific: its kinaesthetics—can serve as something in between a focal point and a source for players’ own body image—or more precisely: a kinesthetically grounded altering thereof—while playing. With *Red Dead Redemption 2*, we encounter something different as with Mario’s weight, yet quite similar in principle: Other than Mario, our avatar here—outlaw Arthur Morgan—does not switch between various incarnations that can be translated into a set of relative kinaesthetic qualities. But Arthur is occupied with quite a various range of activities throughout the game though: running or riding fast while chasing or fleeing, laboriously climbing up mountains, walking through towns searching for places and people, fishing, swimming or—as we have seen—hunting. In addition—other than with Mario—we follow Arthur in third-person 3D. As we have seen while discussing the *movie ride* experience and the phenomenal qualities of a ‘camera’ perspective that is aligned with our perceptual coordinates with regard to *Gran Turismo Sport*, first-person 3D generates a sense of being in motion oneself on the part of the player. With the experience of third-person 3D falling somewhat in the middle between 2D games with avatar and first-person 3D more or less lacking an avatar, it

sort of combines what we have observed with regard to *Super Mario World* and *Gran Turismo Sport*: Moving through the world in third-person 3D—as with first-person 3D—feels like I am moving myself; the presence of the avatar, though, adds to the game's potential to alter my sense of being embodied by means of me perceiving the avatar's movements and their expressive qualities as my own. Apart from individual playing styles,<sup>12</sup> the different actions *Red Dead Redemption 2* includes suggest different ways of moving—with our hunting 'scene' serving as a very good example: The pragmatic aim of not scaring the deer away demands the player to move the avatar very slowly and cautiously. After a whole evening spent hunting while being-in-the-world of *Red Dead Redemption 2* and being(-with) Arthur, I once again noticed an aftermath of the kinaesthetic experience the activity provided—and the way this experience fed back into my own body image: Watching and being-with hunting Arthur kinesthetically via perspective alignment for hours left me with a heightened sensitivity for my every movement and posture, stepping lightly through my apartment with a dance-like awareness of my whole body, almost unable not to impersonate Arthur's way of moving.

Also—similar to what we observed while discussing *Gran Turismo Sport*—we can refer to Arthur as our 'fingers'—or 'feet', one might say—while playing *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Looking at the little 'scene' described above, we once again observe the *kinaesthetic touch* provided by the avatar moving through the game's world. Though here, it is not solely the kinaesthetic quality of the movement itself—like with the smooth driving on asphalt vs. the shaky driving on rally courses in *Gran Turismo Sport*. Here, this touch is rather based in the perception of *audiovisual gestalts*—as we have discussed with regard to Michel Chion's (1994) concept of *synchresis* while looking at *Tetris*. The combination of Arthur's movements becoming slower and more sluggish on undergrounds like sand or snow and the very visceral stepping sounds changing with every change of underground (like in between grass and dried-out surfaces in our hunting scene) create the embodied sensation of touching those different surfaces ourselves; I can almost feel the varying undergrounds under my feet—as anyone who got to play *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s snowy exposition can probably confirm.

In a similar way, additional material qualities of the game's virtual world can be rather felt than understood by means of *synchresis* and *synesthetic* effects grounded in *kinaesthesia*: As with the creaky-crunchy sounds that make us feel the sandy surface while sneaking with Arthur towards the deer, we feel the scrubby bushes' texture as well as these bushes gently brushing our own shoulder every time Arthurs body touches them and triggers that short, swelling rustle mentioned above. Last but not least, we experience the sensation of fleshiness that comes with the wet, smacking sound of the arrow piercing the deer.<sup>13</sup>

Taking all these observations together, we can assume that the praise *Red Dead Redemption 2* received for letting players immerse with its world not as a surrounding environment, but rather as a protagonist of its own as well as the way in which slow pacing and long periods of absence of action—often associated with boredom in gaming—are celebrated by critics (MacDonald 2018) directly refer to the aesthetic experience the game provides—an experience that can be directly linked to *audiovisuality*, *kinaesthesia* and *synesthetic* experiences of touch and materiality within a phenomenological framework of analysis. Or more to the point: Whereas one

could argue that what we have discussed with regard to the phenomenology of playing *Tetris* is rather the experiential ‘byproduct’ of a cognitively challenging logics game, the analysis of *Red Dead Redemption 2* makes a different case. The game’s aesthetics and related experiences of sensibility, embodiment, and subjectivity are not secondary to the game’s story or rules—they ground both story and rules and are crucial to shaping the game’s poetics. Literally: It’s not a bug, it’s a feature.

#### **D. From Singular to Plural and Back: Intersubjectivity, Interactivity, and the Act of Playing Video Games**

Over the course of this article’s second section, we have taken a closer look at approaches to kinaesthesia in video games (Swalwell 2008) and consulted a phenomenological concept on interactivity conceived within the field of developmental psychology (Stern 2010)—with the provisional result of having a theoretical premise that allows for relating movements other than our own to our personal, embodied sensitivity and experiences of subjectivity. Within this article’s previous section, we have taken this theoretical premise as a starting point for briefly discussing a couple of video games with regard to kinaesthetic qualities—leading us towards an initial understanding of how analyzing video game experience can contribute to studying a complex poetics of video games. Considering the crucial importance of a specific relationality to the key theoretical points of reference within this article’s line of thought—*interactivity* in the case of Daniel N. Stern’s (2010) concept on vitality affects, *intersubjectivity* in the case of Vivian Sobchack’s (1992) approach to embodied experience in the cinema—we have kind of circumvented the question at the heart of a phenomenological approach to video games: How does this relationality, the ‘inter’ play out with regard to video games? What relates to what?

Within this last section, I want to conclude our phenomenological deep dive into the act of playing video games by addressing this question. With regard to Daniel N. Stern’s concept of interactivity, the answer is mostly rather simple. His early work (1977) is concerned with the interrelation between mother and child—i.e., in his understanding, kinaesthetic expressivity is a means of sharing and aligning affective states between embodied human beings. In his late work (2010), he extends this understanding of interactivity to audience-performer relations in arts like dance and theatre.

When making the leap to cinema as an art and a media practice, the question for interactivity raises a problematic question: What do we connect with while watching audiovisual images? The bodies represented within the images? Or the media itself? Stern himself chooses the former and—drawing on the work of film scholar Raymond Bellour—declares the single shot as the unit conveying cinematic affects of vitality grounded in actors’ expressivity (2010, pp. 75-98). As much as I value Stern’s thoughts on cinema for the plasticity with which his concept of vitality affects provides a vivid understanding of the kinaesthetic qualities movement can convey—i.e., the perception of movement being tied to felt experiences of kinetic force—I consider his focus on embodied expressivity and the single shot a significant

step backwards in comparison to Vivian Sobchack's neo-phenomenological understanding of cinematic kinaesthesia.

As we have already discussed briefly while taking a closer look at *Tetris* within the previous section, according to Sobchack (1992), the subjective experience of viewing (and hearing) audiovisual images is characterized by a two-fold subjectivity. On the one hand, we—of course—remain aware of our subjective being-in-the-world, of us viewing something from our cinema seat, couch or whatsoever. On the other hand—following Sobchack—the audio-visual gaze of cinematic images, the way the audiovisual image creates an own subjectivized position of seeing and hearing as being-in-the-world by means of camera and sound recording, grounds an experience of the audiovisual image *as a subject of its own*, “an anonymous, yet present, ‘other’” (1992, p. 9). This two-fold subjectivity—being aware of one's own subjectivity while perceptually being put into the position of a cinematic subject that sees and hears—grounds something we could describe as some sort of in-between-state: Of course, we do not identify psychologically with the cinematic subject; but being aligned with its perceptive position of being-in-the-world, we experience the kinaesthetic dynamics of its cinematic subjectivity by means of our own being embodied.

This understanding of intersubjectivity—between an embodied human subject and the film conceived as a disembodied subject existing as perception (and expression thereof) only—is of consequence for the questions raised in this article in two ways: Firstly—as we have seen in the previous section and as other game scholars (Crick 2011; Keogh 2018, pp. 6-13, 19-50) have already pointed out as well as further elaborated on—the idea of an embodied experience of moving, audiovisual images as a whole—instead of intersubjective bonds with anthropomorphic body representations (avatars, non-playable characters) *within* the image only—turns out to be the more fruitful path when looking at the subjective experience of playing video games. Secondly—as I have argued before (Bakels 2014)—Sobchack's concept of intersubjectivity in the cinema implies a second understanding of the very term ‘intersubjective’, one that is crucial with regard to this article's second aim—besides contributing to a phenomenological understanding of the act of video gaming—: identifying generalizable phenomena and concepts that lead the way towards a comparative analysis of the aesthetic experiences associated with playing particular video games.

With regard to cinema, we can say for sure that one of the two subjects within the intersubjective double that Sobchack reveals—the cinematic subject—remains fixed for every single viewer and any repeated act of viewing a certain film. Therefore, in cinema, the (spatio-)temporality of audiovisual images reliably affects affective dynamics on the part of the viewers in a predetermined way (Münsterberg 2013; Eisenstein 2006; Müller and Kappelhoff 2018; Bakels 2017). Or to put it simpler: the process of film-making culminates in a (spatio-)temporally fixed ‘product’ whose perceptible kinaesthetic and rhythmic qualities directly impact dynamic affects on the part of the film's viewers. Therefore, the kinaesthetic experience of a particular movie is not only intersubjective for it lets single viewers relate to the cinematic subject; it is also intersubjective for as *all* viewers relate to the exact same kinaesthetic dynamics. Given the aspect of letting the cinematic subject's kinaesthetics ‘take over’ on a bodily level being crucial to a phenomenological understanding of embodiment in the cinema, the aesthetic experience characterizing cinema as an art form is the reflexive

experience of witnessing oneself being moved in a quite literal sense (Kappelhoff 2004).

This last part changes drastically when we make the leap from cinema to video games as a medium. Video games—unlike films, TV/streaming series or recorded music—are not based on a temporally fixed process of unfolding. To the contrary, video games are subject to what we might call an act of *kinaesthetic appropriation* on the part of the player.<sup>14</sup> But what does this crucial difference to cinema lead to with regard to a phenomenological understanding of aesthetic experience in the act of playing video games with kinaesthesia, rhythm, and subjectivity as its main points of reference?

In order to address these questions and conclude the train of thought this article follows, let me turn our focus towards one last analytical observation—a short sequence from the game *Detroit Become Human* (Quantic Dream 2018). Like its predecessors *Fahrenheit* (2005), *Heavy Rain* (2010), and *Beyond Two Souls* (2013), *Detroit Become Human* plays out as a third-person 3D game without a fixed (central) camera perspective that heavily draws on dialogues as well as decision making processes that let the player choose from a limited set of options, and the possibility of the game's story taking on very different paths due to these decisions. Over the course of the game's 32 chapters, players have to switch between avatars Connor, Kara, and Markus—who all three happen to be androids in a futuristic city of Detroit. With regard to the game's story and poetics, *Detroit Become Human* shares commonalities with films like *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) or series like *Westworld* (Nolan and Joy 2016)—raising the question what defines consciousness, subjectivity, and humanity.

Against the backdrop of our reasoning here, the game's story and poetics are not really relevant. In our quest to get closer to understanding aesthetic experience and subjectivity in terms of a phenomenology of video games, I would like to briefly refer to a short sequence that is of no narrative consequence. Within the game's fifth chapter called *The Painter*, our avatar Markus—an android assistant to a painter—is instructed by his master to find a way to pass some free time. Roaming the large living room of the painter's mansion, players discover a couple of possibilities for pastime—one of them being playing a piano. If we choose to let Markus sit down at the piano, the game confronts us with a choice between four options for available mood pieces (see image 5). After choosing one, the actual act of playing the piano is alike for all mood pieces: a radically simplified digital scoresheet pops up above the piano's keys—and we can start pressing a single button repeatedly, with a short musical phrase, chord or single tone triggered every time we press the button. In any of the four options, the harmonics and harmonical progressions of the respective piece of music are fixed—players can only determine the piece's pace and rhythm by timing the pressing of the button. Hence, the act of letting Markus play the piano itself is as simple as it gets—but the aesthetic experience of doing so turns out to be quite interesting, especially against the backdrop of our thoughts so far within this section.

Due to the fact that the featured music does not rely on a fixed musical measure, the dynamic changes of pace within the music are completely left to the player. Within this simple arrangement, even players that are not musicians themselves can experience—and at the same time carefully explore—their own style of musical

articulation. More than that—this is not simply about music: Given the strong affective quality of music, the player engages in a playful act of shaping time and affective dynamics. The player not only experiences the affective quality of the music, they constantly modulate the aesthetic experience towards something pleasurable. It is exactly in this regard, in my understanding, that the piano sequence from *Detroit Become Human* can be seen as a *metonymy for the relevance of kinaesthesia for video game as a medium in its entirety*.

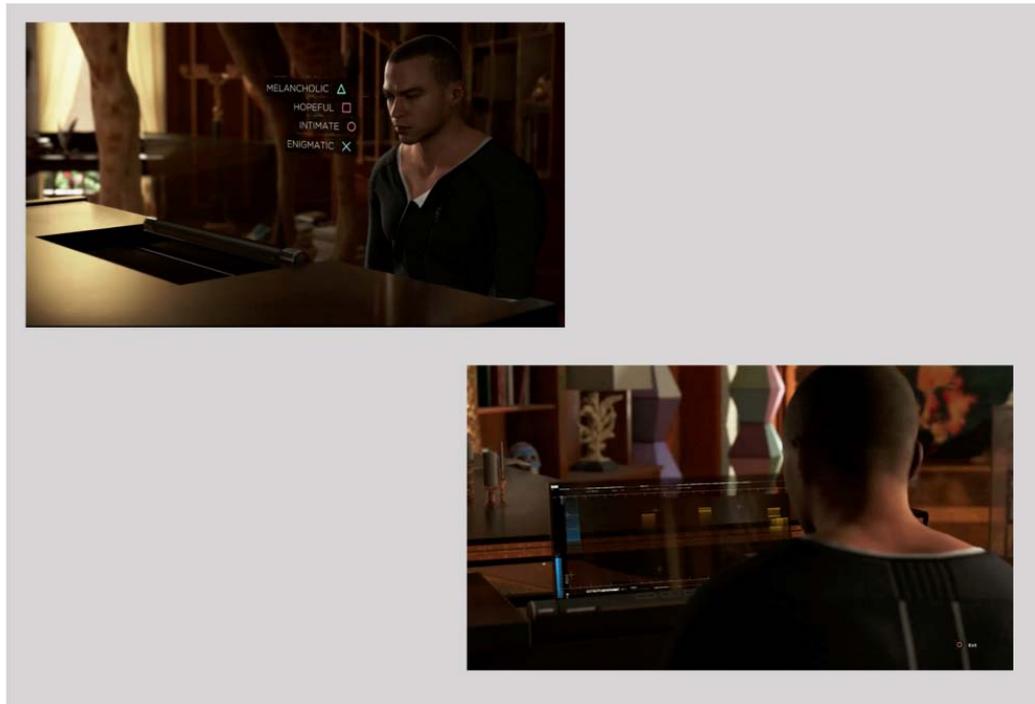


Image 5: Stills from *Detroit Become Human* (Quantic Dream 2018)

Just like film viewers, players of video games are audiovisually confronted with a subjectivity distinct from their own, while at the same time being immersed into it. But given the aspect of agency in video gaming, players—unlike film viewers—are constantly aware of being-in-control of the temporal unfolding of this kinaesthetic experience. Against the backdrop of our thoughts on interaffectivity in everyday life and intersubjectivity in the cinema, this offers a whole new perspective on the aesthetic experience of video games. In this line of thought, playing video games as a practice marks the step from the reflexive affectivity—that is characteristic for arts and media like dance, theatre, or film—towards something I would like to call *an ongoing process of auto-affectivity*: a reflexive experience of one's own affectivity that, while unfolding, is shaped by the very subject that experiences it.

Conceiving the aesthetic experience of video games in this manner offers the possibility to grasp experiences of subjectivity in the act of playing video games as way more than an aesthetic 'effect' of video games that can either be made fruitful with regard to a game's poetics or not. In phenomenological philosophy, the subject is not only an entity that kind of 'anchors' experience. In turn, it is the constant flow of subjective affective experience that constitutes and shapes our sense of subjectivity itself. To put it simply: Affectivity is not only based on subjectivity, it produces it. It is

precisely in this regard that the late French phenomenologist Michel Henry (1985) spoke of auto-affectivity.

Following this article's line of thought, what we have called *kinaesthetic appropriation* in video games can be seen as a constant, playfully performed feedback-loop between the player and the game. A feedback-loop, that is grounded in an experience of auto-affectivity on the part of the player. Within this audiovisual, kinaesthetic feedback-loop, we *experience ourselves as kinaesthetic subjects* and constantly modulate this affective experience of subjectivity by *finetuning our kinaesthetic being-with-the-game towards an auto-affective experience of subjectivity that gives us pleasure*. In other words: From a perspective of audiovisual kinaesthesia, one of the many pleasures in video gaming can be seen in the specific way that video games dispose of the potential to offer us an aesthetic experience intimately tied to who we are. But more than that: video games also offer us a possibility to explore playfully who we want to be. It is in this regard, that video games can become the medium of a playful exploration of subjectivity itself.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This article takes as a starting point and further elaborates thoughts developed within the context of three different conference talks: *Tactical subjectivity. Kinaesthetic appropriation and strategies of auto-affectivity in video game practice* (NECS Conference *media tactics and engagement*, Amsterdam / 29 June 2018), *Materialität, Subjektivität, Performanz—Ansätze einer Phänomenologie des Videospiele* (annual conference of the German Society for Media Studies

[Gesellschaft für Medienwissenschaft] *Medien – Materialitäten*, Cologne / 26 September 2019), *Materialität, Subjektivität & (Auto-)Affizierung—Ansätze einer Phänomenologie des Videospiele* (Workshop *Bildlichkeit, Ästhetik, Agency: Ansätze einer Poiesis des Videospiele*, *Cinepoetics—Center for Advanced Film Studies*, Berlin 7 January 2020).

- 2 Of course, as we will see, the concept of subjectivity—as a capacity, not an instance of the experience of being a subject in a given situation—offers some leeway with regard to the tension between a systematic analytical approach aimed at generating more or less objective, comparable insights across a series of analyses and a phenomenological understanding of experience being intimately tied to perception and a concrete, subjective being-in-the-world (for the concept of subjectivity see Sobchack 1992).
- 3 Given the broad spectrum of theories on movement and kinaesthesia in anthropology, philosophy, as well as different disciplines concerned with arts and media, I will refrain from discussing the phenomenon in general in order to concentrate on an analytical reading of the kinaesthetics of video games. For an extensive account on the philosophy of movement and kinaesthesia see Sheets-Johnstone (1999); for a cultural-historical reconstruction on the importance of *expressive movement* within different theoretical and practical approaches to dance, theatre and film see Kappelhoff (2004).
- 4 In this brief analytical sketch, I am referring to the *Tetris* version published by Nintendo for its Nintendo Entertainment System in 1989.
- 5 The term ‘resembling’ cannot be stressed enough here—given the fact that it is one the core fundamentals of film phenomenology that while resembling everyday perception with regard to a certain audiovisual perspectivity, the experience of embodied subjectivity in the cinema completely differs from the experiences of subjectivity we can make in everyday life.
- 6 Actually, rhythm is a concept that is not addressed explicitly in Sobchack’s central work *The address of the eye* (1992)—but we can include in in our reading of Sobchack given the fact that one of her key points of reference—Merleau-Ponty’s *The Film and the New Psychology* (2019)—treats movement and rhythm as an inseparable couple. In this regard, Daniel Yacavone (2016) has compellingly reasoned for the reintroduction of rhythm as a concept in neo-phenomenological film theory.
- 7 The question whether digital images in general and in video games in particular can be understood to create an impression of space that resembles a cinematic image space is sometimes discussed quite controversially—not least because the most prominent voice in film phenomenology, Vivian Sobchack, explicitly distinguishes cinematic and electronic spaces (Sobchack 2004). Similar to Timothy Crick’s (2011) sympathetic critic of Sobchack in this regard, I argue instead that aesthetic aspects crucial to cinematic experience—visual perspective, the primacy of movement, rhythm, audiovisuality—are valid

theoretical and analytical categories with regard to video game experience as well. Cinematic experience and video game experience substantially differ in a lot of regards, but at the same time share a wide range of aesthetic and experiential qualities that in my understanding mark film phenomenology as a fruitful point of departure for the phenomenology of video games.

- <sup>8</sup> In this regard, the option to choose between third-person and first-person 3D while playing *Gran Turismo Sport* is quite interesting. While playing in third-person 3D, I already experience the cars on rally raceways as heavier than the cars on asphalt raceways—with this experience of weight ‘spilling over’ into my sense for my own body weight. While playing in first-person 3D, this ‘spilling over’ is even stronger, with the phenomenal, kinesthetically grounded experience of weight playing way more into the experience of my own perception of body weight. One might hypothetically assume the potential for altering of players’ body images becoming successively stronger from 2D games with avatar to third-person 3D (resembling a first-person perspective with avatar) to first-person 3D.
- <sup>9</sup> As frequent players of 3D open world games might know, the freedom of roaming the virtual world in these games usually is limited nevertheless by some regions of the world only being available after a certain point within the games’ progression and/or by making quests within the world available within a certain logic of main and side quests and clustering, in effect limiting the possibility to choose a idiosyncratic order of playing quests to a certain cluster while sticking to a larger, linear succession predefined by the games’ skill system or story arcs. Briefly speaking: Most open world games rely on the impression of being able to freely roam the world while actually locating themselves somewhere in between a completely linear and a completely free progression of play.
- <sup>10</sup> For example, Keza MacDonald writes for *The Guardian*: “Were it not so astonishing to look at, the amount of time that *Red Dead Redemption 2* expects you to spend enjoying the scenery might be intolerably boring. But the Old West that Rockstar has conjured here is close to miraculous. Its world is a collage of capsule versions of real American landscapes: the crisp cold of the mountains; mesa-studded plains that offer views for miles; foggy, humid mornings in the bayou in the fictional Southern state of Lemoyne.” (MacDonald 2018).
- <sup>11</sup> It is possible to play the game in first-person 3D as an option. I chose to stick to the default third-person 3D vision for my little ‘scene description’ though—not only because it is the perspective I prefer to play the game in, but also because it makes for a more complex case with regard to the player’s experience of subjectivity in comparison to the ‘full POV’ first-person 3D that fits almost seamlessly with a boiled-down understanding of Vivian Sobchack’s (1992) concept of a film subject.
- <sup>12</sup> 3D games with complex physics and a whole range of possible ways to move through the world (e.g., crouching, sneaking, walking, running) provide the possibility to play with individual paces and styles—with significant implications

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for a kinaesthetic phenomenology of video games, of course. For example, I have been playing *Red Dead Redemption 2* a couple of times with a group of scholars at Freie Universität Berlin's *Cinepoetics Center for Advanced Film Studies* during the winter of 2018/2019, taking turns in controlling the game each session. With me being a slightly impatient person, at one point a dear colleague of mine could not help but kindly ask me to stop constantly running through town while taking my turns – for as he, a frequent viewer of Western movies, preferred to walk slowly through town, especially when entering the saloon. I was simply ruining the game's aesthetic experience of subjectivity for him.

- <sup>13</sup> The way *Red Dead Redemption 2* draws on elaborate, visceral sound design might also hint at the potential to relate what we have discussed so far with regard to Michel Chion's (1994) understanding of audiovisuality to current discourses in neuropsychology on phenomena like auditive perception triggering sensory-motor activity on the brain level—and the relation of these phenomena to the so-called mirror neuron system (Harris and de Jong 2014; Saygin and Dick 2014).
- <sup>14</sup> Given the particular focus on video games as games that are compatible to a cinematic understanding of image space a phenomenology of video games that puts kinaesthesia at its center must of course come with a major limitation—namely omitting games, game genres, and maybe (probably?) an important aspect of even the games discussed here with regard to their kinaesthetics: the aesthetic experience associated with games and gaming aspects that rather draw on cybernetic principles, the logics of information management, and respective paradigms shaping screen space. The (inter)relations between such a perspective on games and the ideas on kinaesthesia developed in this article remain open for discussion. Serjoscha Wiemer's (2012) thoughts on the *scopic regime* in real-time strategy games could lead the way here.