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As the title *The Computer Game as a Somatic Experience* indicates, the following pages revolve around the experience of playing computer games. My overall thesis is, shortly stated, that the experience of playing computer games is founded and savoured as an activity that emerges from the player as a situated embodied subject in-the-world. Initially, some might find it peculiar to insist on a positive embodied experience in an activity that most often is linked with physical inactivity and child obesity (Vandewater 2004). On the other hand, anyone who has played computer games will no doubt agree that they in fact can be bodily engaging in a positive sense. Such a potential manifests in sweaty palms and chills down the spine, when roaming an alien infested space station; or, in the adrenaline rush of racing in top tuned car, head to head with a friend. I have adopted Richard Shusterman's notion of the *somatic*, the lived and experienced unity of mind *and* body (Shusterman 2000b, p.xiii, chapter 10), to avoid such dualistic wondering which reduces the *bodily* to the *physical*. That is, playing computer games is, in some cases, less *physical* than other activities, but, it is by no means less *bodily*. To insist that running, for example, is more bodily than playing computer games reduces the body to its physical movement. In consequence, the term *somatic* should more easily allow me to refer to the constantly lived and felt experience of being a perceiving subject of flesh and blood in-the-world. Subsequently, what I wish to examine is how computer games affect or shape the experience of this somatically lived flux. In this context the term *experience* should be understood as what happens when humans perceive (Ihde 1990). That is, my epistemological starting point is the phenomenological *I can* of a perceiving incarnated subject rather than a Cartesian disembodied *I think*, as Merleau-Ponty formulates it: "Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think' but of 'I can'" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p.159). Approaching the experience of computer games from a phenomenological first person perspective positions my project within a theoretical tradition. Phenomenological approaches to computer games have earlier shown their potential, in both theoretical (Ryan 2001) and empirical directions (Mallon and Webb 2006). My contribution to the theoretical field lies within my focus on aesthetic experience. I will go into the notion of aesthetic later. At this point it suffices to point out: that attending the relation between human and machine (player and game) allows me to propose a framework (revolving around a concept of *displaced engagement*), a framework that opens up to an understanding of the multiplicity of experiences that computer games provide, not limiting it to an examination of the structural and formal elements of the game.

Computer games?

Before approaching this somatic experience, an initial question might rightfully be: what does the term *computer game* delimit? Computer games can be viewed as a phenomenon that has been part of western popular culture roughly since the mid

1960's (Malliet and de Meyer 2005). Moreover, they have traditionally been seen as a fusion between games (e.g. dice-, card- and board-games) a phenomenon dating some 4000 years back, and: the storage, computational, and representational possibilities of the computer (Juul 2005). I will put aside this definition of computer games based on its formal elements and approach the lived experience of games as played. In tune with my epistemological starting point I strive for a phenomenological way of looking at things; concerning myself with *how* as opposed to *what* things are - attend the *experiencing of things* rather than the *things of experience* (Merleau-Ponty 2002). In an effort to do this I will approach the experiential relation between player and game and not the game as something in itself. A brief historical account will testify to the relevance of exploring this relation from a phenomenological first person perspective.

The relation between player and game has been played out on numerous machines and material platforms: early experiments on oscilloscopes and university mainframes in the late 1950's and start 1960's; arcade games and consoles in front of the television introduced in the 1970's; personal computers and handheld units of the 1980's; tiny screens of today's mobile phones. Retrospectively we might, as media archaeologist Erkki Huhtamo suggests, see modern electronic games as a continuation of an older tradition of human-machine relationship (Huhtamo 2005). Although the human-machine relation undoubtedly can be traced further back, Huhtamo views the industrial revolution as the advent of a particular instance of the relation. As steam-powered engines and assembly lines changed workplace routines, the adaptation of machines also became an issue for human culture in a more general sense. One of the ways this human-machine relation was explored on an experiential level was through *slot-machines* (Huhtamo 2005, p.5-7). Being situated at street corners, in bars, hotel lobbies, amusement parks, trade fairs, and later, penny arcades, people used slot-machines as a joyous diversion from everyday life. The experiential qualities of contemporary computer games resemble Huhtamo's description of these machines. To Huhtamo there are two overriding categories.

First, Huhtamo labels the earliest amusement machines *automatic*. Such human-machine relation was limited to a simple and non-continuous interaction. Most often, the spectator inserted a coin in the machine's slot (in some cases pushed a button or pulled a lever) and awaited the machine's response. The relation was in other words passive, as the spectator was unable to affect the machine's state after starting up its mechanical process. To Huhtamo, a certain 'distance' made these artefacts particularly fascinating. Like its predecessor, the *automaton*, the automated slot-machine enthralled by the distanced position it assigned to the user.¹ Separating the spectator from any direct contact with the spectacle and its processes the machine created a sense of autonomous 'otherness'. Furthermore, the slot-machine distanced itself from the other machines encountered in society at the time (mostly industrial machines in factories) by being, in Huhtamo's words: "emphatically useless" (Huhtamo 2005, p.8). The machines were a part of the public sphere, but its spectacle was contained within the feedback loop between user and machine.

With his philosophy of human-technology relations post-phenomenologist Don Ihde describes the player's relation to the computer game in a similar way. Through what he calls an alterity relation, schematised as: $I \rightarrow \text{technology-}(-\text{world})$, the player engages with the computer game as a quasi-other (the arrow \rightarrow indicating at which

aspect of the relation the *I* is intentionally directed).² The world is only context to this relation (hence bracketed), where technology is experienced as something in itself (Ihde 1990, p.97).³ In consequence, the alterity relation falls into the same category as: play, art, and sports, what Ihde calls “disengaged engagements” (Ihde 1990, p.107). Ihde emphasizes the element of competition related with games. Subsequently, he states that the player engages in a ‘dialogue’ with the machine as a *quasi-other*, motivated by a desire to beat the machine. Like Huhtamo, Ihde traces the fascination of computer games back to the automaton, which through its automation exercises machine-autonomy and facilitates an experience of alterity in the spectator (Ihde 1990, p.101). Turning to games in 2009 a similar aspect is easily recognisable. The complexity of physics engines, weather simulations, destructible environments, and A.I. characters testify to a continuous desire for experiencing a sense of ‘otherness’ in the games. But in most computer games this autonomy is complemented with a simultaneous sense of embodiment in the game. A feature Huhtamo describes in his second category of relations found in amusement machines.

Huhtamo’s second category revolves around a relation that allows the user to exert power and bodily effort through the machine. As the slot-machines developed, the spectator’s interaction took on a repetitive character. Huhtamo names this type of machine *proto-interactive* (Huhtamo 2005 p.8-9). The more extensive interaction required by these machines was mediated through explicit interfaces, e.g. the eyepieces, cranks, and levers of viewing machines such as the Sculptoscope or the Mutoscope. Here the spectator interacted with the spectacle by deciding the speed, and perhaps even the sequential order, of the displayed pictures. Huhtamo quotes an advertising booklet explaining the Mutoscope: “In the operation of the Mutoscope, the spectator has the performance *entirely under his own control* by the turning of the crank” (Huhtamo 2005, p.9, my emphasis). Using Ihde’s terminology, such a relation has the experiential qualities of what he calls an embodiment relation. In the embodiment relation (*I—technology*)→*world* I take different forms of technology *into* my experiencing in a way that makes the technology something I perceive *through* (Ihde, 1990 p.72-73). Embodying the technology, a *perceptual transparency* arises in the sense that I experience the technology as extensions of my body – I experience a *quasi-I*.

Contemporary computer games have evidently refined these *proto-interactive* aspects of interacting with a machine. First of all, this is done by requiring continuous player interaction through more complex interfaces (compared to the Mutoscope’s crank the regular PlayStation 3 or Xbox 360 controller has 17 buttons). Computer games are not something I set in motion via one button and passively sit back and watch from a distance; rather, computer games require my continuous interaction in order to unfold. The possibility to choose between different levels of difficulty when starting a game, and tutorial levels where I am familiarised with the game’s features exemplify that computer games are set up to facilitate continuous interaction. Nevertheless, the engagement requires practise and skills from me in order to access the intended spectacle. Put differently, playing computer games requires my embodiment of the game’s material artefacts – I have to master the game’s controls. Secondly, as player I have been given more and decisive influence on the spectacle. For example by allowing me to save my progress or find my own way through a game with multiple outcomes. Level building and different customisations also allows

me to alter and save data that be accessed later and shared. In cooperative-play – which can also be combined with online-play – I influence the experience of other (real) players. That is, I am not restricted to interact with and affect my own game, but also other player's games.

Even as Huhtamo's and Ihde's descriptions fit well with contemporary computer games, their concepts of human-machine relations do not explicate how the relation between player and computer game differs from any other interaction between human and machine. Automatic and proto-interactive, or alterity and embodiment traits, are not restricted to computer games, or other amusement machines for that matter. In fact, most machines require interaction and embodiment from me while also displaying autonomy and a sense of otherness, e.g. by hiding certain processes. For example, my use of a word processor would potentially hold the same relational traits, in the sense that having habituated the letters on the keyboard, short cuts of the programme, etc. the process of writing becomes embodied to the point where the computer or the programme might do something unexpected which would result in an alterity relation. More critically, the concept of human-machine relation has not fully revealed why computer games should be considered a particular somatic experience. But Ihde's concept of the human-machine relation as existing on a continuum can nuance Huhtamo's automatic and proto-interactive categories. That is, in gameplay, the relation between player and game continuously shifts from quasi-I to quasi-other, I experience the computer game both as a natural extension of my body and as something distinct from me. That is, when I initially approach the game, its analogue and digital aspects stand out as something 'other'. But as I play, the game is taken into my subjective space. Through this embodiment of new digital and analogue feedback loops, a game-world is disclosed and the game as a "game" moves into the background. But it is not a stable and constant relation. In this game-world, I might experience a new alterity relation in the shape of the quasi-otherness found in A.I. characters. Or, I might reach a level in the game that is too hard, in consequence, the embodiment relation transforms into a hermeneutic relation as I interpret or analyse what I have to do differently (Ihde 1990, p.80). Even though such a description fails to disclose the particularities of computer games, taking a closer look at its instability or constant transformation reveals why it should be considered somatic and how it differs from other human-machine relations.

The aesthetics of the human-machine relation

In his notion of a *composite relation* philosopher of technology Peter-Paul Verbeek offers an alternative view on Ihde's human-technology relations that more adequately describes the particularities of the relation between player and computer game. Verbeek points out that Ihde's schematics can be complemented with an additional arrow in technology-world junction: *I-technology*→*world* (besides the arrow indicating human intentionality). Verbeek's point is that technology also has intentionality in the sense that technology is never neutral but shapes the world it relates to.⁴ Ihde is not blind to the non-neutral aspect of technology. He takes it into account, by talking about an inherent structure of simultaneous amplification and reduction in all technological mediations (although, he never makes the structure explicit in his schematics) (Ihde 1990, p.78). That is, technology amplifies certain aspects while it

reduces others. Important in Verbeek's emphasis of this structure, is that the particular directedness (the simultaneous amplification and reduction) becomes an essential part of the relation (Verbeek 2008, p.393). As examples of such a relation he emphasises contemporary works of art that favour technological mediation. Using Verbeek's words, the particularity of these works is that they: "generate a new reality which can only exist for human intentionality when it is complemented with technological intentionality" (Verbeek 2008, p.394). To Ihde this technological directedness is a 'side effect' or a 'condition' for scientific instruments that tells us something about the world. With Verbeek it becomes an essential 'possibility' which can be explored for its own purposes – the new reality the composite relation facilitates is the essence of the relation.

That is, engaging with computer games, like engaging with one of Verbeek's art works, has a value in itself. A value we can approach through the concept of aesthetic experience. In Shusterman's revision of aesthetic experience it is possible to delineate a general notion of *transformation* as inherent in the concept. A similar kind of transformation shows itself in Verbeek's composite relation between human and technology, and in the relation between player and computer game. But let us first turn to Shusterman; in Dewey we find the aesthetic experience to be something which 'happens' when the *art product* is in some kind of exchange with a subject "the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience" (Shusterman 2000a, p.22). That is, aesthetic experience is that which is played out as relations between subject and object, and not inherent in the subject or the object as discrete entities – it is the complementation of the two and the new reality which they generate. Quoting Adorno, Shusterman uses phrases which defines aesthetic experience as something which "requires self-abnegation" and talks about aesthetic experience as having a *transformational* aspect as "it is something undergone or suffered" (Shusterman 2000a, p.17-18). Although he describes it as a dynamic relation, the subject is not in full control but rather determined through ideological structures of the artwork (or aesthetic object). Constraints one can only be emancipated from via "external critique" (Shusterman 2000a, p.18). The transformation is thus not arbitrary but conditioned and conditioning in some sense. With Gadamer, similar aspects are also obvious "...the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience changing the person experiencing it" (Shusterman 2000a, p.19-20). Furthermore, a possible relation to computer games become evident as the work of art is compared to games which "...plays its players, submits those who wish to understand it to the rigors of its structures" (Shusterman 2000a, p.20). Again, the aesthetic experience is something which one undergoes by being constrained in certain ways, but nevertheless, a voluntary activity one submits to if one *wishes*. Thus, the aesthetic experience is conditioned by the way the observer is intentionally directed towards the aesthetic object and the way the object amplifies and reduces this intentionality. Aesthetic experience is in some sense the activity or the process of habituating what Verbeek calls a composite relation. It is the composition of a human's intentionality and an object's directedness.

Computer games evidently share these characteristics in the sense that playing is a voluntary act that I submit to – e.g. I 'agree' to take on the tasks the game puts forward whether it involves saving the princess or driving a race car. Gameplay is something I undergo by dynamically exploring my relations to and structures of the game – I make an effort to master and adapt to its challenges. We might also

speculate, that when a computer game no longer offers such transformation (e.g. its narrative structure has been purged or I have mastered all its aspects and it has become too easy) it eventually starts to bore me and I stop playing. It is important to note that it is a transformation that occurs momentarily. We might say it is something that is felt as valuable in relation to everyday experience. It is necessarily not a permanent transformation which I take with me; it is rather something I move in and out of. This is also why I, after having explored all the transformations of a game, might return to it later and enjoy it again. In consequence, my thesis is that this transformational aspect is what gives value to the player-game relation. I am not stating that computer games are the same as art. Rather, I would say that the 'appreciation' of art and computer games shares something. They both require a certain self-abnegating sensibility in order to become part of its relations, in order to understand it and have a meaningful experience. In a certain sense, works of art and computer games both require the observer or the player to habituate its feedback loops – engage in a composite relation to experience the new reality it generates. But playing computer games, compared to having an aesthetic experience with e.g. a painting or a book, is, as it requires my active and continuous engagement with its physical interface, a much more explicit effort.

We can approach this somatic practice further by turning to similar aesthetic conceptions of the encounter between body and technology. For example, as media theorist Mark Hansen's explains it through the works of media artist Myron Krueger⁵:

On one hand, human embodiment serves to "naturalize" technical modifications of the world (and, potentially, of the body); on the other hand, these modifications provide an important source for decoupling or deterritorialization by which the body's habitual intercourse with the world gets disturbed and (potentially) expanded (Hansen 2006, p.28)

To Hansen, the presupposition for the aesthetic value of such works as Krueger's is human embodiment. That is, the relation with digital technology and virtual environments comprise a body with a certain potential, and are realisable only on the background of a more fundamental existential condition: human embodiment in the world. Hansen's take on embodiment rests on a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty describes the body as our general medium for having a world. Similarly is the body our medium for having the world of the computer game:

my body can be a 'form'... in the virtue of its being polarized by its tasks, of its existence towards them, of its collecting together of itself in its pursuit of its aims; the body schema is finally a way of stating that my body is in-the-world (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p.115).

Put differently, to Merleau-Ponty the experience of embodiment is intrinsically linked with the body's existence towards the world. What he calls the body schema denotes a certain bodily spatiality which has an ability to habituate and naturalise the world and objects. This spatiality positions me as a body, not *in* space or time, but rather lets me *inhabit* space and time or allow me to *belong* to space and time (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p.161-162). It is the same spatiality which lets me naturalise the controller, habituate the computer game, and experience a bodily form when relating to the game-worlds. Merleau-Ponty's most basic example of the body's ability to naturalise the world around me is: as I walk through a door I do not stop to compare

the width of the doorway to that of my body. The body is habituated by Being-in-the-world and is source of a fundamental meaning as I move around as my body. Moreover, such a naturalisation often consists of developing an intimate relationship with different objects, exemplified in Merleau-Ponty's examples of the woman with a feather in her hat and the blind man with his stick (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p.165). Both these individuals incorporate objects into their bodily Being-in-the-world. The woman knows from 'within' how far the feather reaches out from her hat. The blind man similarly senses the world at the junction between stick-tip and world, and not at the hand grasping the stick's handle. As Merleau-Ponty formulates it: "Habit expresses our power of dilating our being-in-the-world, or changing our existence by appropriating fresh instruments" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p.166). This quote, and Hansen's above, shows there is a complementary (and equally important) side of the naturalising ability of the incarnated subject.

As the relation also *dilates* or *changes* our existence the body schema and its spatiality is rearranged and renewed, exemplifying the body's ability to comprehend or grasp meaning. In this sense the body is technologically empowered as a *body-in-code*, as Hansen calls it, or perhaps in the case of computer games, a *body-in-game*. In consequence, Hansen's use of the word *disturbed* should not be understood in its negative sense. Rather, the works of Krueger (and I would say, also computer games in general) challenge the habitual embodiment of a user (or player). Furthermore, there is a value in this *decoupling* or *detrterritorialization* which, along with the before mentioned naturalisation, is essential to these works. We might describe it as an experience of the body's acute relationship with the world; an exploration of the body's ability to incorporate meaning and transform how we experience ourselves and our surroundings. We might understand Hansen's decoupling in relation to how Merleau-Ponty acclaimed the modernist artists' (especially the painters') ability to reframe and expand our way of looking at the world (Matthews 2006, p.135). Manifested in the works of Balzac, Proust, Valéry, Picasso, or Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty finds in these works a phenomenological-like "will to seize the meaning of the world or of the history as that meaning comes into being" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p.xxiv). That is, to Merleau-Ponty, engaging in a relation to works of art holds the possibility to change our habitual way of conceiving the world. Through a relation with an aesthetic object there may occur a decoupling with the world of habitual perception, a decoupling or a transformation which holds a phenomenological potential for disclosing the world in an unprecedented way. Something similar is going on in the relation between player and computer game. The common denominator is that the aesthetic potential (the transformation) resides in a perceptual and somatic sensibility.

All in all, the composite relation of a computer game relies on me (as a player) to exert effort in order to habituate and merge my intentionality with the game's directedness. It is through this effort that I come to feel a 'form' and have a distinct somatic experience when I play computer games. As Merleau-Ponty describes it: "It (habit) is knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p.166). Hence, how I come to 'know' the game is through effort exerted in the composite relation which simultaneously naturalises and decouples my somatic intercourse with the world. In other words, the game becomes meaningful as it is habituated through the appropriation of analogue and digital directedness of the

game. The experience of the game-world can in consequence only be conceived as a somatic activity.

The experiential, the representational, and the performative somatic experience

However, to put this praise of the body's immediacy into perspective, one should keep in mind that the body and our somatic experience is also constructed and conditioned by the media that constantly surrounds and it pervades. As Shusterman puts it: "The representational perception of our somatic integrity is not an immediate given but specular media product, requiring even more media than our own body parts provide" (Shusterman 2000a, p.149). Similarly, the phenomenological stance I have sketched in the above does not privilege the body over the mind. Instead, it insists on their connectedness through both the body's and the media product's specular and reflective dimension. In any somatic practice "there is an inevitable complementarity of representations and experience, of outer and inner" (Shusterman 2000b, p.275). So, in order to nuance the concept of the computer game as a somatic experience I propose that we, using Shusterman's framework, regard playing computer games as existing on a continuum of experiential and representational somatic practices.⁶ I am not using these concepts in terms of how computer games aim at somatic improvement. In spite of sport and fitness games such as *Athletic World*, *Wii-Fit*, or *EyeToy: Kinetic* and 'brain games' for mental improvement such as *Big Brain Academy*, the vast majority of commercial games do not have player 'improvement' as an explicit goal. Instead, using the somaesthetic framework in a more broad sense, it is possible to see how games in spite of the complementarity of inner and outer, still are practices, where some are more somatically experiential than representational (and vice versa), in consequence facilitating distinct experiences. Let me briefly describe these.

Experiential

A number of games are focussed on what we can call practices related to an experiential dimension. Here the focus is explicitly on my body experienced from the inside. Such games work on the conditions of embodiment sketched in the preceding sections. These are, for example, games that through mediation of bodily perception (e.g. a first person perspective) strive at presenting me with the game-world of the perspective rather than a perspective of the game-world. A similar instance is simulation games that strive to give me an experience of being a pilot or the driver of a race car. Or, as I am promised on the cover of the World War II game *Call of Duty 3*, playing it: "Brings you closer than ever to the fury of combat". Common to these games is a desire to affect my body, whether it is confronting it with the complexity of flying a plane, the speed of a race car, or the chaos of warfare. The goal is to decouple my habitual and contextually fixed embodiment in front of the screen. Such a decoupling reveals itself as a bodily felt sensation. It is an experience facilitated by constantly requiring me to explore my embodiment and its limits in the game. That is, as I progress through the levels, missions, or quests I have to adapt to new and changing conditions if I want to keep playing; e.g. the faster speed of a new car, the

more precise aim and scope of a different gun, the movement and behaviour of new A.I. characters, or the changing surface and curves on a race track. All in all, each of these conditions require me to habituate the controller and the game in a slightly different way. The experiential decoupling is in other words instantiated as technological directedness changes (to use Verbeek's words), forcing me to make a bodily effort if I wish to sustain the composite relation. However, note that the experiential bodily practice should be conceived as something which operates on a *pre-reflective* level, as Merleau-Ponty would say. Hence, it becomes problematic to precisely articulate the experience – it is immediately felt. But, as shown in cases of players experiencing nausea and simulation sickness, especially in first-person-perspective games, e.g. *Mirror's Edge*, the decoupling is not exclusively something which is particularly subtle or can be appreciated as bodily knowledge in a positive sense.⁷ In fact, this kind of radical bodily decoupling is most often not pursued by game developers, even though we might say that it is actually in these cases that they succeed in placing the player in the game. But, rather, there is a prevailing transparency paradigm inherent in most commercial games, where the naturalising ability of the relation between player and game, and not its decoupling potential, is favoured. Even as this naturalisation most often has been sought through the representational features of the visual interface, a concurrent movement has put more focus on the player as a somatic whole. What I am referring to is the tradition of making physical objects that bring the game closer to the player's body, such as: guns, vibrating controllers, or vehicle paraphernalia in the shape of steering wheel, shift stick, and pedals. In recent years the opposite trend has emerged (although with a similar attention to the player's body) with cameras and motion-sensors positioning the player's bodily movement in the game. Here, the game-world or game-space extends beyond the screen to include my bodily position in front of the screen, movement, and gestures as a factor in the game. All in all, practices focused on enriching the experiential dimension of relating to the games. These artefacts serve to amplify the empowering sensation of a certain practice whether it is shooting a gun or swinging a tennis racket. In consequence, naturalising the relation between player and game and make it more immediate. However, as I shall indicate in the next two sections, such bodily immediate trends are always complemented with representational aspects of the somatic. Furthermore, on a performative level, they might serve to underline my body and its doings, rather than function as a natural extension into the game.

Representational

Besides abstract games, e.g. *Tetris* or *Boom Blox*, that do not represent any bodies in their game-worlds (yet still have a somatic experiential dimension), most other games are more explicitly played out as both experiential and representational bodily experiences. The conflict inherent in computer games is often acted out as a clash between bodies. Whether it is the cartoonish bodies of *Super Mario Bros.* or the motion-captured super-soldiers of contemporary first-person-shooter, such as *Crysis*, participating in these conflicts revolve around being a body that interacts with other bodies. Put differently, the somatic experience of playing computer games does not merely revolve around doing things with your own body, but also by taking on the role as particular body (or bodies) interacting with other bodies. On one level, this is often manifested in male and female stereotypes, e.g. the muscular testosterone pumping

body of Duke Nukem or the elegant, yet lavishly shaped Lara Croft. In this sense most games have a representational decoupling and naturalising potential as I take on a given role and perform the tasks presented to this character: fight the aliens, win the race, or whatever it might be. In addition, the characters in the games are to a certain extent continuously decoupled in gameplay either via virtual bodily transformation, e.g. in the shape of plasmids in *Bioshock* enriching the body with new abilities, or by continuously equipping the body with different, larger, and better equipment (most obviously manifested in the gun fetishism in the first-person-shooter genre). Moreover, games also facilitate a representational somatic experience in terms of the distance between me and the bodies in the game. That is, in third-person perspective games I control a character from without. Exemplified in the 'playboy-archaeology' of *Tomb Raider* this perspective enables the body of the character to be an object for me and not only an extension of my experiential intentionality.

It is debatable how decoupling the above mentioned relations really are. Most of these characters are stereotypes that are quickly and effortlessly recognised and understood as bodies with certain potentials. Rather, such stereotypical characters exist (arguably a part of the gaming industry's quest for immediacy) because they are easy to naturalise. However, some games stand out as they seem particularly focused on the body as the focal point of the gameplay. The game *Five minutes to kill (yourself)* gives me the task: kill your own character.⁸ Situated in an office landscape the 'protagonist' has to avoid attending a forthcoming meeting by committing suicide. Insulting my co-workers so they attack me, sticking my head in the paper shredder or getting creative with a stapler, are some of the ways I can inflict damage on my character's body, hopefully so much that it eventually kills it. By turning traditional game-body-logic upside down (to kill my own character rather than to fight for its preservation) this game decouples the habitual conception of how to relate to the character I control. A similar decoupling occurs in *Condemned 2: Bloodshot* as I play through an entire level only to find out that all my actions took place in the mind of the alcoholic and schizophrenic protagonist. In addition to putting the rest of the game and what I encounter in a new distrustful perspective, it simultaneously emphasises the in-transparency and the otherness of the first person perspective I am trying to habituate and naturalize in order to play the game.

Performative

Besides the experiential and the representational somatic experiences, there is also a *performative* experience in the sense that my relation to the game to some extent can be seen and appreciated by others. The notion of performativity should thus be understood in the sense; that the way of interacting and the context of interaction becomes an important part of the experience. This dimension exists in continuation of the before mentioned games that focus on alternative means of interaction – e.g. motion sensors, cameras, steering wheels, and other physical gadgets. Together with the Nintendo Wii console, a game-series like *Guitar Hero* or *SingStar* are prime examples of this kind of experience. That is, when I play tennis in my living room with *Wii-Sports*, battle with Van Halen in *Guitar Hero*, or sing along with *SingStar*, the *situation* and the *act* of doing these things with my body is emphasised. The fact that I am simultaneously playing tennis and not really playing tennis, playing guitar but

then again, not really, brackets the activities and opens up a performative space that surrounds the act of playing – it enables a new perspective on playing computer games. Playing Wii-tennis; swinging my arm to hit the ball instead of pushing a button does not necessarily naturalise the relation and put me in a more immediate and transparent contact with the game-world. Instead of transcending the experience of being positioned in front of the screen playing a computer game, the physical movement rather accentuates the activity and my body as a body in front of the screen. As I bump into my opponent who paradoxically stands, not opposite but next to me in a two-player game, my physical body and the surrounding objects are brought to my attention. But these decoupling discrepancies might be enjoyable. In other words, it might be fun to watch myself and others try to naturalise the relation and there might also be something fun in being watched. The *doing* becomes an important aspect of these practices in the sense that even though a game of Wii-tennis can be played sitting down, only moving your hand and wrist, it is most likely not. Similarly, posing like a rock star is part of playing *Guitar Hero* and *SingStar*. In consequence one's doing also becomes an object or plays a part in the social somatic experience that these types of games encourage to.

Conclusion – Towards displaced engagements

Through the above I have sketched a framework for future exploration of the somatic relation between player and game – how computer games are experienced as a somatic unity of mind and body. Allow me to sum up.

Through a media archaeological perspective computer games can be seen as a continuation of a general human-machine relation, where the coupling of human and machine is pursued for its inherent qualities. Approaching this composite relation through the concept of aesthetic experience it became obvious that the relation through a simultaneous decoupling and naturalisation 'changes' or 'restructures' me and my playing. Put differently, the relation is something I 'undergo' through my simultaneous embodiment in the world and the game-world. Subsequently, through the framework of somaesthetics at least three instances (often intertwined) of such a somatic experience can be identified by looking at contemporary commercial games in a broad perspective. In an experiential perspective it is a somatic experience felt from within, where I constantly displace my bodily subjective space. I habituate the controller and relate to changes in the technological directedness of the game; an experience that is appreciated pre-reflectively as empowering and potentially nauseating. In a representational perspective the experience emerges as the relation to other bodies in the game always exists in a cultural context; both my own character and role, and other bodies encountered (their audiovisual appearance, inter-textual references, and/or possible actions). In a performative perspective the experience can be described as conscious relations to the context, situation, and act of engaging as a somatic whole and watching others do the same.

It is the complexity of these (intrinsically linked) experiences that should be pursued through further phenomenological descriptions of concrete computer games. Put differently, Ihde's notion of the relation between player and computer game as something which facilitates a *disengaged engagement* should be explored more fully. Most important, it should not be confused with a state of *disinterested interest*

isolated from the world in a Kantian sense – which would be the sort of idealism that phenomenology seeks to avoid. Given Ihde's focus on technological instruments that serve scientific purposes, he does not attend the subtleties of how we relate to computer games (and the other disengaged engagements he mentions). Although computer games might not serve an explicit practical purpose it does not mean that I am cut off from the world when I engage in such a relation. In a Heideggerian sense, the game-body and the game-world are no less 'worldly' than other objects and phenomena in the world as I am intentionally directed towards them and incorporate them into my subjective bodily space. They become tools in-order-to fulfil an existential purpose (Heidegger, 2000, Division one - Chapter 3: §§ 14-24). In consequence, my relation to the game does not disengage me from the world, rather, it re-enacts my condition of Being-in-the-world as a body. Moreover, Ihde does not tribute these disengaged engagements the same epistemological potential as sketched through Merleau-Ponty, who sees works of art as potentially disclosing important aspects (or even the *truth*) of the world as they teach us how to look at the world anew. And an overriding feature of the computer game is, from my point of view precisely, that it presents us with a possible world. It is a somatic experience that both naturalises and decouples our relation to the world.

So, to be more in tune with this potential, I propose to refer to the somatic experience of playing computer games as a *displaced engagement*, rather than calling it a disengaged engagement. My point is that playing computer games I am in no way disengaged, but rather highly engaged as a living soma in-the-world. In consequence, it would be more suitable to use *displaced*, as the relation transforms my habitual engagement with the world. Potentially on an experiential, a representational, and a performative level. To put it bluntly: understanding computer games and their relation to the player as a soma-in-the-world should be sought through a concept (like displaced engagement) that opens up to the complexity, the simultaneous decoupling and naturalisation of embodiment, that is characteristic for this relation.

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Notes

- ¹ The automaton, a self-operating machine, e.g. a mechanical animal or anthropomorphic figure, was displayed by touring showmen, in museums and fairs. A human (the showman) mediated the interaction between the audience and the automaton; he showed people to their seats, collected money, introduced and explained what they were about to see and interacted with the automaton (sat it in motion). (Huhtamo 2005, p.8)
- ² Ihde borrows the term alterity from Emmanuel Levinas and defines it as: “*the radical difference posed to any human by another human.*” (Ihde 1990, p.98) In the encounter with another human there is an infinite difference between me and the other. The ‘alterity’ or ‘otherness’ of this human-to-human relation is defining for both the other and me. In the encounter ‘I’ become ‘me’ because of the other, and vice versa. In relation to technology it is, according to Ihde, possible to have a similar experience of technology as something autonomous and different from me.
- ³ It is important to note what the term *world* means in this context and how it relates to what is usually called a game-world. In phenomenological terms *world* should not be considered an external world out there, as a world for it-self. Rather, in a Heideggerian sense, *world* is an aspect of Dasein’s being, as he describes it in *The Worldhood of The World* (chapter 3 of *Being and Time*). *World* should be understood existentially rather than categorically. Through a certain existential *care* (*sorge*) the world presents itself as possibilities: as tasks,

goals, options, and things to be done. The world of the computer game, or the game-world, is exactly a *world* in this sense. It is a world I am primarily an actor in, and not a spectator to. The game-world discloses itself because I have an interest in it. Playing the game I am 'concerned' with how to unfold the game-world as I pursue certain interests (e.g. following the game's narrative, exploring the game-world in playful manner or playing against a friend on- or offline). In consequence, the notion of game-world should not be thought of as something that is less 'real' than the rest of what we usually call *world*. The game-world is just as much *world* as any other world I have a certain concern with.

- 4 Verbeek uses the term *intentionality* when describing the non-neutrality of technology. However, as I see intentionality as a term intrinsically linked with human existence, an existence not shared by technological artefacts, I will instead use *directedness* when describing the ways in which technology has a certain relation to the world.
- 5 Myron Krueger (born 1942) is one of the pioneers within interactive media art. Works like *Glowflow* (1969), *Metaplay* (1970), and *Videoplace* (1970) all show distinct attention to the potential of human embodiment. That is, the technologies used in his works served as extensions of the body, and showed its ability to create a world (Hansen 2006, p.26).
- 6 The somaesthetic framework was coined by Richard Shusterman as the: "*the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory aesthetic appreciation (aisthesis) and creative self-fashioning. It is therefore also devoted to the knowledge, discourses, practices and bodily disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it.*" (Shusterman 2000b, p.267). To Shusterman this discipline consists of three overriding dimensions. (Shusterman 2000b, p.271-276) *Analytic somaesthetics* is a theoretical dimension that includes: ontological, epistemological, and socio-political perspectives on how bodily perceptions and practices play a role in our conceptions of knowledge and reality. *Pragmatic somaesthetics* is a methodological dimension concerned with practices and methods of somatic improvement. As Shusterman says, these aim "...to make the quality of experience more satisfyingly rich, but also to make our awareness of somatic experience more acute and perceptive." (Shusterman 2000b, p.273) Accordingly, the pragmatic dimension can be arranged into two intersecting categories of representational and experiential forms; emphasising practices that respectively focus on the body's objective/external side and its subjective/internal side. *Practical somaesthetics* is a dimension devoted to make concrete and physical use of the methods described in pragmatic somaesthetics.
- 7 Physiologically simulation sickness is a discrepancy of perception and movement that might occur as audiovisual representations give an illusion of motion incompatible with the absence of motion, felt in the inner ear (Hettinger et al. 1990).

⁸ *Five minutes to kill (yourself)* can be played here:
<http://www.adultswim.com/games/game/index.html?game=fiveMinutes>
[Accessed: 20 September 2009].