

For Interface, Against Regression!

An Exploratory Surgery of a Transhuman Umbilical Cord

Hanna Wirman
D.A. Candidate
Faculty of Art and Design
University of Lapland, FI
hanna.wirman@ulapland.fi

Olli Leino
Ph.D. Candidate
IT-University of Copenhagen, DK
Center for Computer Games Research
leino@itu.dk

Introduction

This paper aims to criticise utopian expectations of computer game interfaces' ability to disembodify the player or create virtual subjectivities entirely outside the meatspace, the flesh-and-blood reality populated by physical beings. Instead, it aims to show that transhuman existence has already been achieved by computer games which, by enhancing physical bodies with game interface elements, helps players to reach digital simulations through their extended bodies. In so doing, the paper suggests interface elements as senses of a human body. The interface forms an umbilical cord through which new senses are enabled and existing ones limited in the gaming situation. Transhumanity is understood as an evolutionary transition towards a higher state of humanism achieved with physical and/or mental augmentation.

Senses in play

Recent years have witnessed computer game interfaces that attempt to evade their intermediary position between the player and the game and “immerse” the player “directly into” the game. These developments may be driven by the idea, originating in the HCI community, that the interface exists to facilitate fulfilling tasks and does not have any intrinsic value apart from its instrumentality. The interface can also be seen as standing in the way of “immersion”.

For greater immersion, audiovisual capabilities have traditionally been extended with “rumble packs”, “force feedback” and dedicated interface hardware such as dance mats and electronic musical instruments. Recently *WiiFit* has integrated balance into the sensory toolbox of game artist, and Philips *AmBX* is supposed to integrate

smell. But even if seeing and hearing are accompanied by balance, touch and smell, “entering into the game” is haunted by an issue hard to overcome. Tomas (1995) raised the question of “how to exist in an environment that consists of pure information?” and in answer argued that the human organism needs to be transformed into “a pattern of pure digital information”. However, the player is a carbon-based lifeform having no apparent way out from meatspace in the near future.

For Merleau-Ponty (1962), the issue is not about existing in space or time, but about inhabiting both time and space. This inhabitation is carried out by the operational intentionality or the basic “intentionality of the body-subject”; “the concrete spatial direction of an attitude or posture” towards an object in the world (Reuter, 1999, 72). Thus to inhabit a computer game the player has to be able to perform her embodied intentionality, or, motility, in the game. The most important thing that the game interface can facilitate is this particular inhabitation of a computer game player within a new information environment, not any of the individual operations it allows the player to perform on the game. The interface is a surface allowing two parties of fundamentally different kind, the simulation and the human player, to communicate with each other. The interface and HUD elements are significant, as they relay and aggregate information that is relevant within the “closed circle of meaning” of the game/play, (cf. Gadamer 2005, 112) but which the meatspace senses cannot necessarily grasp from the mere diegetic representation.

Experiments like *FeelSpace* belt (König et al., 2004) demonstrate that the sensory repertoire of a human being can be transformed with technology. The interface and HUD elements reconfigure the body of the player

and enhance the sensory system so it can cope with the challenges presented. We can speak in a McLuhanian or transhumanist sense, about enhanced humanity. Whereas transhumanism usually relates to a “higher” state of a human body and radically new and better capabilities of physical beings (such as anti-aging and cryogenics) computer games offer an everyday involvement of technology in extending human capacities. The transhuman player in the context of computer games is a mundane cyborg; a player who has inhabited an environment consisting of information with the help of new senses that provide her information about this new environment.

The sensory system of the transhuman player is composed of all the individual interface elements available: for example, minimap as an extension of bodily sense of direction, healthbar indicating the state of basic needs, and visual flickering around a distant character replacing the aural indicators of an approaching enemy, each corresponding to one or more competences of how the transhuman body can perform its embodied intentionality in the simulation. The interface is an umbilical cord through which, in the gaming situation, new senses are enabled rather than the existing ones limited.

In Merleau-Ponty’s view (1962, 213), what we call “vision” is “a thought subordinated to a certain field, and this is what is called a sense”. Furthermore, “visual field” denotes the “access to” and “opening upon” a system of visible beings that are at the disposal of one’s gaze with no effort made on one’s behalf, only by reason of one’s position in the world. The player of *Tetris* (1986) has an “opening upon” the simulation not unlike

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of visual field; the interface element providing the information about the form of the next block to fall from the top edge of the screen is an exo-prosthesis, a transhuman sensory organ, whose field is defined in relation to the inner workings of the simulation, it extends one block beyond the current one the player is dealing with.

No, you are not me, Mario!

Transhuman players should be the true target group of computer games; they can be presented with challenges the overcoming of which requires skills and abilities that are not available for those operating solely in the meatspace. It is important to note that even though their abilities have been extended to the virtual, their bodies have not become any sort of obstructions or the players themselves “disembodied”; the sensory stimuli originating in the virtual reaches its presentation through rays of light reflecting on the retinae, and commands are given by muscle movements. We agree with Stelarc (2007, 456-457), that “information is the prosthesis” but as long as the body it “props up” is a human body, which, like Pepperell (2003, 20) notes is “fuzzy edged” inasmuch as it “cannot be separated from its supportive environment for any length of time without coming to harm”, it is not an “obsolete body” (Stelarc 2007, 457-8). For example, a Korean cyber-athletics team has a chef of their own, who cooks dishes from ingredients that are known to be beneficial for those parts of the human body that take the most strain in the activity of computer game play.

The temptations of games with “transparent interfaces” are aimed at those who refuse the enhanced sensory repertoire. These games do not make use of the full range

of capabilities of the computer game medium and seem to resemble interactive narratives instead of simulations. If the player is not given the possibility to sense what there is in the environment, it is impossible to offer him abilities to act within the environment.

In games with so-called “transparent interfaces” the player is forced to suspend her disbelief and accept that the diegesis consists of representations which, when compared to the meatspace, are crude regardless of the state-of-the art technology involved. Even with disbelief suspended, the player can only act “as if” it was her own unique body that was reaching towards “the world”; the universe into which we can plunge through “transparent interfaces” is more fictional than virtual (cf. Aarseth 2005) and our own particular plunging is not necessarily in any way different to the millions of other similar “plungings.”

Understanding the player subject as a transhuman player relieves one from clumsy attempts to bridge the unbridgeable gap between information and flesh (avatars, disembodiment). As such, a transhuman computer game player is a perfect example of the anti-cartesian model of being: imagination and technology is used in order to create a new enhanced body which is therefore able to act within a space and time different from meatspace. It is often forgotten that it is a fundamental quality of the computer game medium that “avatars” are primarily features of the interface, and the true subject body is that which is constructed by enhancing the physical body’s abilities into the virtual through the interface. Only as interface elements avatars can be personal in the same way that for example one’s limbs are personal.

Aarseth, Espen. 2005. “The Perception of Doors: Fiction vs. Simulation in Games.” In *Proceedings of the 6th DAC Conference*, pp. 59–62.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. 2005. *Truth and Method*. London: Continuum.

König, Peter et al. 2004. *The Study Project feelSpace*. Retrieved 30 April 2008 from <http://feelspace.cogsci.uos.de/en/>

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London & Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Pepperell, Robert. 2003. *Posthuman Condition: Consciousness Beyond the Brain*. Bristol: Intellect Books.

Reuter, Martina. 1999. “Merleau-Ponty’s notion of Pre-Reflective Intentionality.” In *Synthese* 118, pp. 69-88.

Stelarc. 2007. “From Psycho-Body to Cyber-Systems. Images as post-human entities.” In *The Cybercultures Reader, Second Edition* edited by D. Bell and B.M. Kennedy. London & New York: Routledge, pp. 456-471.

Tomas, David. 1995. “Feedback and Cybernetics: Reimagining the Body in the Age of the Cyborg.” In *Body & Society* 1(3-4), pp. 21-43.