Computer Games, Image-Consciousness and Magic

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Introduction

This paper argues that computer games are best understood as a type of image-consciousness (*Bildbewusstein*). To show this, I will use key insights from Husserl, Fink and Sartre to show that the proper structure and experience is neither normal perception nor an act of pure imagination or phantasy, but a type of intermediate consciousness that can ultimately be considered to have its own structure and be its own experiential category. Moreover, because of its intermediate nature I will also show the peculiar 'magic' of such a category, in that it can take up and combine the best elements of both the perceptual and the imaginary world.

The paper is broken up into four main sections. The first will briefly articulate how our experiences of computer games are usually considered to be perceptual, or at least involve perceptions, in a good deal of the philosophy of games literature, with the term 'perception' not being questioned in any great detail. Using phenomenology theory I will argue this is a mistake; a closer theoretical look will show the issue is not so simple. This will begin in the second step, where I will summarize the phenomenological natures of three basic modes of consciousness in Husserl – perception, phantasy and image-consciousness – showing that the latter finds its place between the other two. This issue is then debated through two other phenomenologists, Fink and Sartre, in the third section. Fink argues for image-consciousness to be a special type of perception, whereas Sartre would place it as a subcategory of the imaginary. At the beginning of the fourth section I will argue that although these differences are not unimportant, all three thinkers ultimately agree as to the intermediate nature of the experience, with most of the main differences then being of terminology. Here I will then also show why it is best to understand this intermediate mode of consciousness as particularly apposite for understanding the immense pull computer games can have on us, not least their 'superreality' and a general magic. Indeed, thanks to its intermediate status, image-consciousness can draw the best from both the perceptual and imaginary world.

I will conclude with some reflections as to why these issues are important to understand more broadly today, including a speculation or two where developments might be heading.

Computer Games are Not (Straightforward) Perceptions

My interest in the philosophy of computer games began in the first half of 2016 and increased in the last year and a half. At the DiGRA conference in Turin in 2018 I was particularly surprised to hear most speakers talking about how computer games are 'perceived', even though all of it takes place on a screen, through a headset, or otherwise. This was strange to me because from my training in phenomenology; from this disciplinary perspective it seems such

experiences are decidedly *not* perceptions, at least not straightforward ones. The very fact that they are experienced through screens and such already changes their fundamental phenomenological structure. Of course the experience of various computer games, especially nowadays, can be as if one is having perception-like experiences – but the precise point here is that the *as if* is all-important. For example, although first-person shooters, especially now and surely to continue, are becoming increasingly realistic (for example the gameplay in *Call of Duty: Black Ops III* (2015)), we still inherently know that we are not *actually* being shot at, that our life is not *actually* in danger, etc. In short, even though the gameplay and realism can make us feel *as if* this might be do or die while we are immersed, we always somewhere know that it is and remains a game.

Of course computer games have perception-like qualities, predominantly of vision and sound, but also now of increasingly haptic feedback elements. This, however, is a far cry from saying they *are* perceptions. This would even present a grand problem: if computer games were actual perceptions, how would we even be able to distinguish games from reality, digital bullets from real ones? This point already shows there is some kind of basic difference, and we need, in my opinion, to figure this out more comprehensively.

Of course the philosophy of computer games has already made inroads in various ways, not least the acknowledgement that computer and digital games are usually virtual as opposed to actual. This is a distinction stemming from the philosophy of Bergson ([1896] 2012) and popularized and stressed even further by Deleuze ([1966] 2013) and a number of subsequent scholars (for example, Ansell-Pearson 2005; Smith 2009). It has also made its way into a number of philosophy of games scholars. Juul's (2005) characterization of games as between real and fictional worlds is well-known. Calleja thematizes a similar point by situating the virtuality of computer and digital games between the real and the imaginary (cf. 2006; cf. also 2008). Much more recently, Vella and Gualeni (2019) are careful to show the difference and the relation between actual and virtual experiences, with computer games falling in the latter category while still being greatly capable of influencing the former. In this manner, even a brief look at a snippet of the literature already shows that many inroads have been made with regard to the experiential nature of computer games, not least the very plausible characterization that they are about virtual experiences that nevertheless can stem from, and have great affects and effects upon, actual ones.

I do not think the same can currently be said of the basic nature of perception. Indeed, more often than not this term is not even defined or looked at for itself; it is just used, very often in a loose and fast manner. For instance, Ijsselsteijn and Riva (2003: 6) claim that '[t]here is no intrinsic difference in stimuli arising from the medium or from the real world – the fact that we can feel present in either one or the other depends on what becomes the dominant perception at any one time'. Such claims do not consider that a restriction of stimuli in one world, namely to vision and audio (and perhaps some tactile elements) in the mediated world, might already change the very nature of experience of such a world, even to the extent that it is misguided or even simply wrong to apply the term 'perception' to it. Similarly, even Calleja, who is well aware of differences and the interrelations between real, virtual and imaginary, manages to employ a rather indiscriminate use of terms like 'perception' and 'agency' in his own definition of virtual environments (2008: 14): they '**are computer generated domains which create a perception of space and permit modification through the exertion of agency**'. Is our so-called 'perception' of space precisely the same in a virtual environment as it is when we get up in the morning? Our 'exertion of agency' too? What would this even mean,

and how would we, in such a case, know any difference between a game and our everyday perceptual reality?

Such ambiguities and imprecisions in some rather basic experiential terms permit me to go into the phenomenological theory of perception in more detail, not least, moreover, its difference from and relation to some other primary modes of consciousness. This is indeed the point: although the philosophy of computer games has already produced many rich texts on the nature of the objects of computer games, and of our experiences of them both specifically and more generally, the precise question pertaining to what perception might actually entail has been largely overlooked when it should not have been. Considering this, in phenomenological terms we need to step back from the content or the *noema* of the experience, and categorize precisely the structural fibre or mode – the *noesis* – of it. Here we will find it is not a case of perception but of something else, which I will endeavour to show in the next two sections, thereafter bringing back and showing the importance and relevance of such theory in the fourth and the concluding sections.

Perception, Phantasy and Image-Consciousness in Husserl

The nature of perception is an ever-recurring theme in Husserl's thought. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of pages on the subject matter. It is a base mode of consciousness that most grounds all other forms.

Perception both presents objects *tout court* and yet, strictly speaking, one is only ever directly aware of various 'aspects' (*Abschattungen*) at any given moment. More simply, even given such a basic complication perception is always about a *physical presence*; as experienced in our everyday, naïve natural attitude, an actually present, physical thing is given immediately and directly to us, the perceiver:

> [T]he <natural> experience that is presentive of something *originarily* is *perception*, the word being understood in the ordinary sense. To have something real given originarily and "attentively to perceive" and "experience" it in an intuiting simpliciter are one and the same. We have originary experience of concrete physical things in "external perception[.]" ([1913] 1983/2009: §1.)

Perception is thus always about present objects – things; it is an essential tenet of this mode of consciousness. This, however, also brings other laws with it. Indeed, that perception has to do essentially with physically present objects also means such objects are necessarily experienced as *real*: 'Perception makes a present reality appear to us as present and as a reality' ([1898-1925] 2005/1980: 4/4). The German term for 'reality' here is *Wirklichkeit*, which is elsewhere rendered as 'actuality'. And indeed, Husserl does seem to use the two terms interchangeably. Generally, this characterization means that one cannot but believe in the actual reality of things in the world:

> With the idea of *actuality* we stand in the system of thetically *unmodified* intentionality, in the intentionality of doxa, of belief. Belief is not something appended to presentations [*Vorstellungen*], not a *feeling* associating itself with them, not a way of being affected, now present, now absent, attending such presentations; on the contrary, it is the *unmodified consciousness itself*. It is subject to laws of reason; that is, to the essential laws of the intuitive fulfilment of unmodified consciousness, or, correlatively, to the essential laws of the positing

of objects as identities of unbroken confirmation that can "exist" in themselves in contrast to the changing (unmodified) consciousness. (id.: 670/557-558.)

This 'belief' is not propositional and reflective ('I believe that this cup is real'), but quite automatic, pre-reflective, and instinctive. The base mode of perception necessarily constitutes and contains an automatic recognition of actuality, reality. In other words, actuality or reality belongs to the very experiential fabric of perceptual consciousness. In Husserl's terms, this most basic form is the 'unmodified' (or 'unmodalized') mode of perceptual consciousness which, by its very nature, is one of automatic belief in the independence and durability of things even in the face of conscious variation and absence. Further, it is a *certain* belief (cf. id.: 264/215) that is also characterized as necessarily *impressional* (cf. id.: 267/218).

There can of course be all sorts of modalizations, which is to say modifications (including illusions and hallucinations – cf. Smith 2002), but this can only happen on the back of a more primordial and basic form of experiencing *Wirklichkeit*, much like recognition of dreams *as* dreams can only happen on the back of an extended, temporal waking life. In sum, perception is the most basic and primordial form of consciousness we know, and has primarily to do with real, present things. This is encapsulated in Husserl's recurring terms for it: original or originary consciousness (for instance: [1918-1926] 2001/1966: 40/4).

On top of this, perceptual experience is necessarily *inexhaustible*. Indeed, Husserl goes so far as suggest that even God would not be able to perceive an object all at once (cf. id.: 56/18-19), for even if you posit an omnitemporal and omnispatial being that could supposedly "perceive" all aspects of everything at once, Husserl's rejoinder would simply be that this is no longer perception, but perhaps a kind of universal and infinite intellectual 'seeing'. In Husserl's own terms: 'We can never think the given object without empty horizons in any phase of perception' (id.: 56/19); perception is always *situated*, always *perspectival*, which also means it always presupposes a perceiver – or in Husserl's terminology, a *Leib* (a lived body). This *Leib* is the 'absolute zero-point' of all perceptual experience (cf. id.: 584/297). It facilitates all perception even to the extent that one can never perceive certain aspects of it itself; '[t]he same lived-body which serves me as means for all my perception obstructs me in the perception of it itself and is a remarkably imperfectly constituted thing'[1] (Husserl [1952] 1989/1952: 167/159). Indeed, looking at the back of one's head through a medium (e.g. a mirror) is already not an act of perception.

Inherently related to the *Leib* is that perception is also always essentially *synaesthetic* and *kinaesthetic*, always already using all of the senses a living being has combined, and always already in motion. In Husserl's understanding, this means that to speak of any one sense apart from others that usually accompany it is already the work of rather static abstractions and analyses; on the everyday phenomenological level our senses are always already in movement in highly intricate and dynamic relations not only with each other, but also with the whole world, its people and things. Actually, in Husserl one starts to see that synaesthesia and kinaesthesia have their main roots in touch; this latter is literally the foundational sense that not only allows us to perform basic actions like standing and walking, but also harnesses all the others together into a properly centralized perceptual system.

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[1] Translation modified – ,Derselbe Leib, der mir als Mittel aller Wahrnehmung dient, steht mir bei der Wahrnehmung seiner selbst im Wege und ist ein merkwürdig unvollkommen konstituiertes Ding.'

Such a system is Husserl's *Leib*. This is further essentially characterized as 'the absolute Here […] of all spatial orientation' ([1918-1926] 2001/1966: 584/297), which also always carries the 'I-can' of a conscious agent ([1893-1917] 1991/2013: §18; and [1913] 1983/2009: §27). These essential characteristics of our lived bodies mean that we can all probe and investigate the things of perception indefinitely (so long as we are living of course). In short, perceptual consciousness always presupposes an embodied agent, situated in a spatial world. Such spatiality is necessarily *horizonal* in the sense that there are always inner (looking closer) and outer (looking beyond) horizons to absolutely everything we perceive (cf. ([1918-1926] 2001/1966: 43/6-7). Such horizons make up the very nature of perceptual experience; horizonality is another essential structure to perception.

Spatial horizons are just one dimension of perceptual horizon. Indeed, along with space, one of Husserl's major achievements is to show how perceptual consciousness is always already in a very complex temporal horizon as well. This aspect of horizonality necessarily contains an absolute 'Now', which is that other necessary dimension of the *Leib*'s absolute zero-point (cf. id.: 584/297). More extendedly, this is Husserl's well-known, but very complicated (see, for instance: Brough 2011; de Warren [2009] 2011; Zahavi 2004) analyses of time-consciousness, where for every moment of perception there essentially belong three 'moments' of the 'primal Now', retention (i.e. the just-passed) and protention (the just-not-yet) that are nevertheless always already fused together in a continuum of our actually lived experience (cf., for instance: ([1893-1917] 1991/2013: §14).

Physically present, real and actual, certain and impressional belief, inexhaustible, situated, perspectival, necessarily synaesthetic and kinaesthetic, embodied in spacetime, horizonal – such are the essential characteristics of Husserlian perception.

The case is very different with our phantasies. Indeed, after initially asking 'whether any essential distinction at all exists between' ([1898-1925] 2005/1980: 14/15) perception and phantasy, Husserl starts to discover that phantasy is essentially different from perception because of its essentially *irreal* tonality. Ultimately this amounts to saying that Husserl stresses the *as-if* quality of phantasy (see, for instance: id.: 606-607/505); phantasy has always already neutralized and bracketed the perceived *in order to* explicitly evoke absent, irreal, reality-neutral and even ideal objects that are decidedly *not* (fully) given in perceptual experience, and may never be:

> Phantasying is set in opposition to perceiving and […] to all acts that posit something individual and concrete as existing. Perception makes a present reality appear to us as present and as a reality[…]. *Phantasy*, on the other hand, lacks the consciousness of reality in relation to what is phantasied. (id.: 4/4.)

Phantasy is opposed to perception because the former has to do with absent, irrealized and non-real objects. In a word, '[c]onsciousness of what is *not present* belongs to the essence of phantasy' (id.: 63/58-59). This also means that phantasy does not posit the necessary and certain existence of its objects; it lacks the doxastic mode of belief. I can of course phantasize real, existent objects, but I do not have to, and even if I do I know they are not actually there before me like in a case of perception.

In this manner, it belongs to the very structural fibre of perception to posit its objects as existent; in phantasy not. Quite the contrary; the essential characteristic of phantasy is its *as-*

if character – it is *as if* this unicorn could exist, but ultimately it does not, at least not like a perceptual thing does.

There are of course differences in content here (my friend is real; a unicorn is not (yet)), as well as degrees of verisimilitude, immersion and captivation. Nevertheless, the general point remains: phantasy, with its inherent capacity to neutralize and irrealize reality, opens up the realm of the inactual as such. Indeed, Husserl at one point calls it '*inactuality* consciousness' (*Inaktualitäts*bewusstsein – id.: 359-360/299; cf. also: Jansen 2013: 68). This indeed is the crucial point; Husserl notes well that there is a '*protean* character of phantasy' ([1898-1925] 2005/1980: 65/60) which is excluded from perception – this latter has essentially more stability and solidity (see: id.: 34/33). In short, there is a discontinuous, chop-and-change, staccato-like element to phantasy that is not present in perception. Here, although one can of course have rather fixed, stable and recurring phantasies, and although one can have very intense phantasies where one even momentarily forgets their as-if quality (dreams, illusions and hallucinations are the prime examples), if one is to retain a difference between one's perceptions and phantasies, this as-if dimension is always structurally present in the latter, no matter how powerful or immersive it might be in other respects.

Thus, in the usual walks of life, the basic difference between perception and phantasy means they mutually exclude each other at any given moment. In other words, one cannot perceive and phantasize at the same time. Try it: try to perceive and imagine a chair simultaneously. I think one finds one either looks at (perceives) the chair; or one imagines it (here closing one's eyes helps, another tell-tale sign); or one kind of hesitates between the two without really doing either. In Husserl's own term, '[a]s soon as we focus our attention on perceptual objects, the phantasy field is *gone*' (id.: 75/69). This is the same vice-versa, as corroborated by Bernet:

> [A]n object can never be simultaneously both really perceived and really phantasized, even though it is nonetheless true that real perception implies the possibility of phantasy and that real phantasy implies the possibility of perception. Thus, phantasy and perception can never be reduced the one to the other, although they are still necessarily related to each other in the form of a relationship of modification. (2002: 340.)

The two acts are mutually exclusive at any given moment, even though on a broader, more conceptual level they imply each other at every turn. What is crucial here is that this ultimately quite stark opposition creates problems for Husserl's own account of 'image-consciousness' (*Bildbewusstsein*), which seems, somewhat contradictorily, to contain both perceptual (real) as well as phantasized (irreal) elements in one seemingly unified mode of consciousness. Indeed, Husserl has many expressions for this latter type of consciousness, with two of the most striking being 'perceptual imagination' (cf. ([1898-1925] 2005/1980: 86/79) or 'physical imagination' (cf. id.: 90/83). Based on the current analyses, this should strike one as oxymoronic; how can one have a mode of consciousness that has *both* elements of the perceived (presence, reality and the like) *and* elements of the imaginary (absence, irreality and the like) when the two are seemingly opposed in their phenomenological natures?

Husserl gives a complex answer that has long-lasting tensions. Ultimately it is characterized as a curious hybrid that seems to contain elements that are both there (are real, perceivable) and not there (are irreal, phantasizable). When I look at a photograph, for example, there are actual,

perceived elements that are evidently there before me; and yet the photo also depicts something or someone that is decidedly not there, perhaps never was, and perhaps can never be (again).

In Husserl's own terms, image-consciousness has a structure of its own, with three essential components that nonetheless always already interlock in the actual lived experience:

> 1) [T]he physical image, the physical thing made from canvas, marble, and so on; 2) the representing or depicting object; and 3) the represented or depicted object. For the latter, we prefer to say simply "*image subject*"; for the first object, we prefer "physical image"; for the second, "representing image" or "image object." (id.: 21/19.)

Husserl is talking about a painting or sculpture here, but this basic structure holds for other media from Husserl's time (for example a photograph), plus a whole host of media (televisions, computer screens, smartphones and the like) that came after him. Actually, I think it should be quite clear that this form of consciousness can extend beyond the primarily visual. For example, certain physical soundwaves (physical image) are sensed and heard (image object) in a manner that gives one intentional access to a certain song (image subject – 'Yellow Submarine'). In this manner, the latter is only made present *through* the specific, physical version one is hearing.

Image-consciousness is thus external physical phenomena stimulating one or more senses to experience an object that is not properly and fully there in a perceptual manner. A computer game is hereby a prime example. And indeed, whether primarily of vision or easily extendible to other senses, the structure of image-consciousness, as has just been quoted, *always* has a tripartite structure for Husserl: the *physical image* (*physische Bild*) is the physical matter involved, and places (at least part of) the experience squarely in the realm of the perceivable; second, the *image object* (*Bildobjekt*) is all the sensuous experience stemming *from* the physical image; and third, the *image subject* (*Bildsujet*) shows that one transcends what is immediately before one towards something that is not perceptually there. If the physical image is clearly in the realm of the perceivable, and the image subject is only accessible thanks to our capacity phantasy – i.e. it is decidedly not present – then the second, middle element (the image object) has the most ambiguous status.

Imagine playing *Doom* (1993); the physical image is my computer and all the physical materials that support the images; the image object is my immediate phenomenal experience of the game at the current moment; and the image subject is the more complete and transcendent experience of *Doom* itself, including its general setting in and around Mars as well as the next enemies, levels and challenges to come – all of which are of course made possible through the other two components, in the actual experience all fused in a lived dynamic. As a biological human, I cannot (yet) be actually present in the game like my avatar is; our capacity for image-consciousness however allows me to be pseudo-present *through* the technology (computer – physical image) and my phenomenal experience (image object) *of* it (the virtual environment – image subject).

What is this mode of consciousness, then? It is clearly not a straightforward case of perception, because in perception I do not transcend towards something that is only virtually there. Indeed, with images, digital or otherwise, it is usually quite impossible to perceive the supposedly "pure sense-data". In short, one normally always already sees an image *as an image,* and not the supposedly "pure" perceptual colours, pixels, or the like. Moreover, even if

this latter were possible, it would take a conscious effort, which means this is not the automatic and most natural way that we deal with such phenomena, at least in our everyday lives.

It does not seem, however, to be a straightforward case of phantasy, either, because in this latter I can simply close my eyes and imagine playing a computer game, for instance, without any reliance upon a screen. For Husserl, then, straightforward – or at least 'pure' – cases of phantasy do not seem to require a physical image, and maybe not even an image object.

Perhaps image-consciousness is simply a hybrid then, a mixture between perception and phantasy, where to call it a bit of both or neither – in the latter case it would then be a structure or mode of consciousness in its own right– could both be acceptable characterizations. For now I think it is fair to decide it as a unique tripartite structure different from both perception and phantasy, and actually finding its conceptual and structural home between the two. The discussion however continues with two other phenomenologists.

Fink and Sartre

One of the main goals of Fink's work *Vergegenwärtigung und Bild* ('Presentification and Image') was to categorically distinguish our capacity for phantasy from our ability to see images and pictures in various artefacts of the cultural world. Sculptures, paintings and photographs were of course the paradigmatic examples of Fink's time; now image-consciousness can apply to much, much more, not least computer games.

In this case, Fink's point of departure focuses on anything that involves 'something unreal, something unpresent, as if it were present' ([1930] 1966: 67), which can therefore include both phantasies and physical images, in contradistinction to Husserlian perception. Here, Fink is at pains to express that image-consciousness, in direct contradistinction to phantasy, is 'a determined intentionality that belongs, in its descriptive basic character, to a class of intentions that can only be made understandable in the context of a general analysis of neutrality-modification'[2] (id.: 68). Neutrality-modification means 'a belief in the mode of as-if' (id.: 69), including 'all those which portray an "unreality", […] e.g. image-consciousness, apperception of a game, portrayal etc.' (id.: 71). Much of this sounds very Husserlian; Fink however extends the discussion to a category where the external objects themselves have something neutralized, indicative and transcendent – in short more than simply perceptual. Fink calls these '*medial acts*' (id.: 72) that 'keep a real medium open for the appearance and self-showing ability of an "unreality"' (ibid.). In this particular text, Fink's remaining focus is thus to explicate one[3] type of such acts, image-consciousness.

For Fink, image-consciousness is ultimately a unity of two, not three, essential components: the '*real "carrier"*' (ibid.) and the '*"image-world"*' (id.: 73). These are fused in our lived experiences, but can be phenomenologically analysed.

For Fink the image-world 'is always and essentially together with a real carrier' (id.: 74), be this the carved marble, painted canvas, pixeled coloured computer screen or whatever. This is already the essential difference with phantasy for Fink; the carrier means there is an external physical element to image-consciousness that phantasy does not have and that thereby

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[2] All translations of this text are mine.
[3] For the others, cf. Fink [1957-1975] 2016/2010.

makes the former more determined – not least physically – than the latter could possibly ever be. Moreover, the carrier qua carrier is essentially overlooked in the normal functioning of image-consciousness (cf. ibid.); indeed it is all that real physical material that actually must be overlooked if it is to portray something that is not actually and fully there. In this manner, it is 'a certain anomaly if this carrier comes itself into thematic view' (ibid.), for instance a broken or malfunctioning screen.

Elaborating upon this, Fink goes on to explain that there is an essential '*"[c]oncealment"*' (id.: 76) to the function of the carrier; the carrier must not reveal itself *as* a carrier. In short, the carrier is that anonymous 'plain reality insofar as it is *covered* with the image-world' (ibid.) – it localizes and fixes the image-world in a particular, physical thing in the real world, but also allows you to go automatically beyond it.

The image-world is obviously the second essential element, that which the physical materials actually portray. Together the two components are always already and naturally fused in the phenomenal experience, making such experiences so many 'windows' (cf. id.: §34) into relatively determined image-worlds.

To take an image from *Rocket League* (2015), it is almost impossible to look at this and *not* see a car in an arena; it is almost impossible to focus on the image as a bunch of mere shapes and colours and pixels; one 'sees' a car inside a stadium instead of perceives pure arrangements of colours and shapes. Of course many perceptual elements can be and are transmuted in – but crucially in a pseudo, unreal and digitalized manner sense.

For Fink it is crucial to remember that image-consciousness is an essentially different structure than that of phantasy; the former has a physical carrier that allows for determined windows into a pre-constituted image-world which, precisely because the latter is only facilitated through a physical carrier, is much more determined and concrete. Image-consciousness is this fusion of carrier and image-world that makes '[t]he intuitability of the image-world […] essentially a presentative-impressional intuitability' (id.: 75), and *not* a phantasized one. In this manner, '[t]he unreality of an image-world can essentially only be an abstract moment of a determined reality' (ibid.); for Fink the realm of image-consciousness is between the realms of pure perception and phantasy, but because of its physicality ultimately

it is a special type of perception, one of physical, external and therefore determined images which nonetheless also give you access to transcendent objects and irrealities that are still not actually there like this table might be.

Fink's explications thus build upon some Husserlian insights but with some crucial and clearer differences. Indeed, Fink avoids much of the ambiguity of Husserl because he avoids the conceptually ambiguous 'image object'; in Fink the carrier is evidently physical, the image-world evidently not. Moreover, when fused together, as they necessarily are in our lives, it is a mode of experience in its own right, basically a clearly delineated type of transcending perception, or external imagination – however you would like to term it.

For Sartre, he does not use the term *Bildbewusstsein*, but 'the imaginary' (*l'imaginaire*), notably for *both* phantasies of objects like unicorns, as well as what would be experiences of things like computer games. Indeed, for Sartre, the awareness and engagement with external, physical images is still wholly on the side of the imaginary. It is not a hybrid category between perception and imagination as one reading of Husserl might suggest; or a mode of consciousness in its own right as another might; and it is certainly not on the side of perception as Fink would ultimately have it. For Sartre, all images, whether external and physical, or supposedly merely internal and flighty, are of the same fundamental phenomenological structure: various psychophysical analogical materials are used to evoke transcendent objects that are either absent, irreal or reality-neutral.

Let me take two examples, each one on the opposite end of the spectrum. The first is one person imagining a unicorn; the second is playing a computer game with friends.

Someone imagining a unicorn on their own would be a paradigmatic case of what is usually characterized as a mere internal mental image. Under Sartre's conception however, there are always psychophysical materials, as well as a transcendent factor, even to these types of images. The transcendent element is the imaged unicorn itself, the noematic imaginary object of the whole experience. It is indeed an object – not a thing (i.e. a perceptual object) of course – but an object in its own right with its own peculiar characteristics, not least its flighty, irreal, and mind-dependent nature

How do we attain to such an object? Through various materials that are present and immanent to us; in this case our knowledge and memories of unicorns, horses, horns, particular myths and so on. Indeed, the brain and its access to our memories allow us to evoke our own images of an irreal and perennially absent object that we nevertheless are able to experience precisely through our phantasy. Although each imaging act might be different for each person – some might have a more visual and colourful imaginations and others less – the transcendent character puts us all in the same structural boat when we aim our mind at such irreal beings.

In this manner, supposedly purely internal images have hyletic impressional data in the form of brain matter and activity, as well as the concomitant conscious use and employment of knowledge and memories to explicitly evoke a transcendent irreal object. The only difference from external images for Sartre is that the analogical materials being used are within our own skins – and yet the crucial simultaneous insight is that we never just remain within our own skins; we always transcend towards an object, in this case an irreal and imaginary one, that we create based on what we know and have experienced, but that we nevertheless are not ourselves and that we have put hovering transcendently before us.

Indeed, Sartre's thesis here is that not only in perception, but also in phantasy, we are always already outside and beyond, inherently geared towards transcending way beyond ourselves. This however is only simultaneously possible because of present psychophysiological materials we have at our disposal. I have already talked of knowledge and our memories; Sartre's other two main internal analogical materials used – affectivity and kinaesthetic sensations – also have a decidedly physical and concrete feel to them. In this manner, although external images do indeed have an external element that can determine what you can imagine quite rigidly, for Sartre the formal structure remains the same: various psychophysical materials evoking objects that are not really or fully there. Actually, one could even argue that the image of a unicorn is quite determined too, for if one does not have the right knowledge of this object, and if one does not include various more or less general characteristics in the construction of this particular image (horse and horn for example), then one can say one is not in fact imagining a unicorn at all.

To press this point home further, now let us look at the other end of the spectrum. Playing a computer game with friends. Of course the details and textures here are very different. The screen, its sounds and vivid physical colours are decidedly outside of me, and therefore wholly have the concreteness and physicality of perceptual objects. It is also a much more detailed and prolonged experience, with complex interactions, plots and characters both real and digital, all presented in a social, communal environment that has its actual people controlling digital avatars and the like.

Nonetheless, the great differences in details and complexity all notwithstanding, it is still, for Sartre, ultimately another paradigmatic case of imaginary experience and structure precisely because all these external and physical phenomena are not perceived for themselves but once again allow one – along with one's knowledge, affectivity and kinaesthetic sensations – to transcend into an imaginary realm and world of the game designers' creation. We do not perceive mere pixels on a screen; we automatically see an image of someone or something that was created in a place and time that we were not privy too. In this manner, such an experience is also at bottom of a Sartrean imaginary structure where external and complex physical phenomena can now combine with our own psychophysiological analogical materials, thereby allowing us to transcend way beyond our seats into the gaming experience.

In short, none of these experiences are 'perceptually' present on the screen in a phenomenological sense; they are images designed precisely with our inherent and wonderful capacity for the imaginary in mind, to be automatically taken up by our inherently transcending nature for fantasy, external and digital or otherwise.

Image-Consciousness and its Relevance for Computer Games

We have just seen three of the most profound phenomenological thinkers on the natures of perception, imagination and image-consciousness. Taking the lead from the incredibly detailed insights of Husserl, all three agree that there is a clear and crucial difference between acts of perception over against acts of phantasy. Indeed, even though vocabularies often differ, all are ultimately in unison that the structure and objects of these two fundamental types of experiences differ widely, and I have been at pains to show how perception is essentially about real, inexhaustible and mind-independent things, whereas objects of phantasy are not.

The sticking point amongst the three thinkers is the problem of image-consciousness, a term Sartre does not use even though clearly his theory of the imaginary incorporates it. Husserl hesitates slightly between characterizing the external imagination as either a mode of consciousness with its own unique tripartite structure of physical image, image object and image subject on the one hand, or a hybrid or blend of characteristics of perception and phantasy on the other. Ultimately I believe the first characterization is the most steadfast and representative of his thought. Moreover, even if one goes with the second option, this 'hybrid' or 'blend' could be seen to breed the new tripartite structure in its own right. In this manner, although admittedly details and vocabulary do change for a phenomenologist who promoted the discipline as an eternal beginning, the clearest articulation of image-consciousness is as a special mode of experience with its own tripartite structure, which, moreover, can also fit into a broader picture as an intermediary between pure perception on the one hand, and pure phantasy on the other.

Fink's version of image-consciousness collapses image object and subject into one and portrays these special phenomena as windows in the world of perception, supported by so many external, physical carriers. Hence, image-consciousness is not a mode in its own right but a special type of perception – a special subsection if you will – where indeed the carrier is the defining element because of its utterly physical, determining nature that still nevertheless opens one up to so many various transcendent image-worlds.

Sartre goes the other way to Fink; he argues that there are indeed many psychophysiological materials for our supposedly pure mental images, thereby allowing him to equate image-consciousness on the side of the imaginary, as ultimately having the same formal structure. In a way, Sartre is a mirror, a converse image of Fink; image-consciousness – again not a term Sartre even uses – simply makes up a subsection of the imaginary, much like for Fink it makes up a special subsection of perception. For Sartre, indeed, all imaging experiences use psychophysical materials to evoke objects that are not perceptually there and may never be. Whether such materials are supposedly purely internal or also have an external element is of secondary issue for Sartre; once again the basic structure in each case allows transcendent imaginary objects to appear through analogical materials for those objects. Thus image-consciousness is consolidated here as a subsection of the imaginary at best, harbouring the same formal structure as the latter even though it necessarily involves a physical, external component that internal mental imaging acts do not.

There seems to be quite a bit of serious disagreement between the three thinkers on the issue of image-consciousness then, even though all of their broader theories on perception and imagination are highly compatible. It must thus be asked whether such disagreements are terminal or is there a way to resolve them? Also, what is the relevance of all of this to computer games?

To answer the first question, it is either mode in its own right (Husserl); a special kind of perception (Fink); and a part of the imaginary with an external component but the same form (Sartre) – these are the three options. Such differing characterizations notwithstanding, in all three cases the key is that it is our capacity to experience transcendent objects through present, physical and external materials that are necessarily combined with elements of our own psychophysiology.

With the ever-increasing presence of such technologies as screens, image-consciousness is a more predominant and important category than ever before. This can hardly be understated, and of course it is where the theories' relevance to computer games comes in. Indeed, playing a computer game is a paradigmatic example of a case of image-consciousness, where one's own psychophysiology (knowledge of the game; one's feelings; one's bodily movements) allows one to control, interact and inhabit the transcendent and virtual game-world. It is thus a structure of image-consciousness (Husserl and Fink) or the imaginary (Sartre), and actually makes the differences in terminology rather moot. The key is that all three agree it is *not* a case of (straightforward) perception; computer games of course use materials from the perceptual world, not least our pieces of knowledge, feelings and bodily movements; but they allow us, by their very structure, to interact with a transcendent, digital object that does not obey all the laws of perception that I have outlined above. Of course the player, computer and pixels are all physically present and subject to physical laws; however, the game-world opened up through these is not in the same way – it is virtually, digitally present, where our actions therein are not perceptual but are irreal and digital, and very often fantastical. Here, we already inherently know the difference between shooting a gun in actual life and shooting one in a game; the 'certain and impressional belief' of perception is missing. In short, we know we are in an *as-if* situation in the latter.

Computer games are also not inexhaustible; they are limited by their coding and specifications, as well as what we as players put into them. They do not go on forever like the perceptual world does. Also, although pretty much all computer games use situatedness, perspectives and kinaesthesis, all of these are again in an imaginary, as-if register, whereby our actual psychophysiological engagement with the game is taken up in virtual, digital manner through our commands into the avatars in the game-world. There are of course always horizons of space and time in game-worlds, but again they, by the very nature of being on the screen, are not of the same order of perception.

As computer games continue to advance, it looks like many will increasingly try to match our senses, and thereby the perceptual world, as best as they can. Of course some games already approach audio, and even visual, reality quite well, and there are also rising tactile and proprioception advances, particularly in head-mounted displays (HMDs) and their accompaniments. Nevertheless, such advances remain a far cry from becoming indistinguishable from our perceptions, which constantly involve all of our senses, and it is moreover a matter of speculation whether this would ever be possible. Computer games are so engrossing because they take up many vital elements from perceptual life, but they belong to a experiential, imaginary structure that means they are not perceptions themselves.

Actually, the fact they are not tied solely to the stringency of perception is one of their main strengths – it opens them up to a more wholesale form of magic that the world of perception is often bereft of. This is indeed the structural key for me: computer games, especially in many of their current forms and where they might be heading, are such powerful media because in a way they can have the best of both worlds, namely the best of the perceptual *and* imaginary worlds. Indeed, many computer games (for example first-person shooters, racing and sporting games) take up many rules and laws of perception, physics, and nature and try to represent them as accurately as possible in order to make the game very lifelike and realistic. On top of this, though, any game designer can add in elements and capacities that we do not have in our daily lives – the ability to fly and soar for instance – and so many computer games harness the lifelike qualities of our perceptual experiences while *also* adding and

combining more fantastical and imaginary elements. This, for me, is summed up well by what I would call a general magic, where a new category of 'superreal' or 'superreality' comes in, that is at once realistic and fanstastical. Computer games have inherent imaginary structures but also take up many elements from perceptual reality; this 'superreality' therefore because they combine elements not only from our perceptual realities but also from our own creative, imaginary irrealities, thereby becoming phenomenal object that is neither just real nor just imaginary, but a forceful combination of the two – superreal. Indeed, computer games, from *Mario Kart 64* (1996) to *Fortnite* (2017), have all been taking the best from both worlds as their basic modus operandi already for decades now.

In this manner, computer games – especially as they continue to develop – are increasingly able to approach and very accurately represent the laws of perception, while they also are able keep and develop many fantastical elements, if they so choose. This means computer games are the realm of creating superrealities par excellence, where the interaction and involvement of their users can be enchanting, captivating, and mesmerizing in the extreme, and is therefore the source of their magic too. Magic here, generally speaking, is simply the superreal's capacity to captivate and enchant through digital and virtual phenomena that often flout laws of perception and of nature, thereby also capturing our imaginations, desires, emotions and values even to the point of addiction.

Indeed, I dare say a not an insignificant number now feel more at home in such computer worlds, and there is a growing literature on the matter, both written and otherwise, as testament to this significant development. Generally I believe this is because often more joy can be afforded due to a more liberal mixture between selected elements from basic perceptual reality, coupled with more enticing and manipulable elements of fantasy and irreality. Indeed, Sartre even argues that many, not least artists, opt for primarily imaginary lives, and have been doing so for millennia because reality is often way too coarse and nauseating. From this context, the life of a serious gamer would be one more instance of such a life.

Conclusion

I believe the conceptual, phenomenological issues in this paper are important to understand because it is first of all important to know the basic differences between acts of perception, phantasy and image-consciousness – especially nowadays. Indeed, although it is important to note that computer games are not ultimately about perception and reality under this conception, even though they can and obviously do have real influences in these domains, it is equally important to note that many are increasingly approaching the phenomenology of our more usual and traditional perceptual realities. As the technological capacities of computer games march on, therefore, many are starting to provide more complex analogical materials that cover aspects of our lived bodies that were not possible before. Head and hand movements of various VR technologies now immerse one much more in an environment that feels increasingly real and lifelike. On this score, I think there is little doubt that many designers harbour the ultimate wish to get as close to all the capacities of perception as possible, even to the extent of making them indistinguishable, or at least no longer making perception special in any way.

For now I think perception still has elements and pleasures that cannot be repeated in computer games. A delicious meal with loved ones would be one such example. However, as technology develops, coupled with the fact that reality is often too nauseating and hard to confront and deal with, I can see an increasing *Ready Player One* scenario where many people simply prefer to exist in such worlds than deal with the actual one. Of course there is nothing

wrong with this in itself; the problem however is that people can get sucked into such worlds against better and longer-term interests, both individual and social, thereby ultimately leaving one isolated, unsatisfied and even doomed-for. Indeed, even though our human and social realities are often very ugly and are even deteriorating, this is even less of a reason to shirk away from the challenges we as real and active beings have to face now and in the coming years. Computer games can of course teach on a lot about one's self and others, and they can give one skills and a platform to develop as a person and also make significant influences on actual people and in actual real-world situations. Nevertheless, the overly capitalistic, escapist and yes addictive character of many mainstream computer games also leaves the powerful advantages open to abuse, and is thus a pitfall that should be understood if one is to guard more against it.

The last issue is a conceptual, almost metaphysical one. Could the analogical material of future computer games become so complete that it is no longer really possible to distinguish real from not, perception from imaginary? Would such develops maybe just transcend this distinction altogether and what would that mean for our societies online and off? I would say we are a long way off from such an eventuality, even if it is possible at all, and that a minimum difference would remain between stepping into a digital game and back out again, no matter how verisimilar the rest is.

And finally, perhaps much more plausible is that most digital games are not ultimately interested in this, in replacing reality, but are more engaged in developing intriguing new mixtures of supperreality and all the magical, captivating components, for better and worse, that come with this. These points, of course, are all open for discussion – one that I think it is important to continue.

Games

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS III. Treyarch/Activison, PS4, 2015.
DOOM. id Software, MS-DOS, 1993.
FORTNITE. Epic Games, PS4, 2017.
MARIO KART 64. Nintendo, Nintendo 64, 1996.
ROCKET LEAGUE. Psyonix, PS4, 2015.

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