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GAME OBJECTS AS INTENTIONAL OBJECTS

Introduction

Nowadays our daily lifeworld is drenched with simulated objects that digital technology brings up. Experiences such as watching the seamless insertion of computer animations, special effects in contemporary movies and television commercials are all too familiar to us. Computer games, constructed through digital technology, enable us to immerse in a virtual world that is completely different from our daily lifeworld. In the computer-game world, objects are encountered as if they were real. (Heim 1993, 1995, 1998; Martin 2009; Sagen 2012) These objects are rendered real by players during the game-playing. The aim of my present paper is to inquire into the ontological status of these game objects. My research will be based on the phenomenology of Husserl, in the framework of which I will examine the following question: to what extent the phenomenological thinking can cope with the issue of virtual objects, so long as we are aware of the fact that phenomenology was developed long before the development of cyberculture, the type of culture that apparently characterizes our daily lifeworld.

1. The Reality of Computer Games

Looking at the reality of a computer game from the angle of phenomenology, one tends to evoke the concept of image-consciousness. The reason

is quite simple. The reality of a game object is first of all the image that displays through the computer screen. The screen as interface is comparable to the canvas for a traditional painting or the film for a camera. So long as the game object belongs to the category of image, it is no more than a variation of images, just like the painting drawn by hand, the photos taken by camera, the film taken by video recorder. All of them belong to the category of image. In the terminology of Husserlian phenomenology, they share the common ground of image-consciousness. Certainly one should not ignore the fact that virtual reality is a result of digitalization. When the camera was invented, it was a major innovation that resulted in a discrepancy between the traditional way of expressing and the modern way of producing images. Digitalization is another technological advancement that has produced commensurate changes in regard to images. In the framework of phenomenology, we would like to raise the following question: How can Husserl help us assess the significance of digitalization? To be more precise, is the image-consciousness still available for the analysis of a game object?

In Husserl, the image-consciousness is based on imagination. As representation, the imagination is in contrast to perception that incorporates the vivid presentation of real objects. In perception, the object is given genuinely in original experience. Together with the potential givens in horizon, the object of perception is apprehended as a transcendent object. Moreover, a belief in objective existence is posited. (Hua XVI: 141) In contrast, the object is not originally experienced in imagination; it appears instead only as image. That is, the object is not present, rather, it is represent. In case the image is solely mental, it is pure imagination, whereas in case it is displayed through material basis, it turns into externalized image, a painting, for example. Besides perception and imagination, both of which Husserl determines as intuition, there is conceptual apprehension that proceeds with abstract concepts as well as linguistic or scientific signs.

Things that are imagined are not taken to exist objectively. Image-consciousness appears when people, for example, watch a film, in which they actually perceive the moving image on the screen. The things represented there, be they people, automobiles, or anything else, are not actually present. Husserl holds that in image-consciousness of physical image there are three objects:

the image or "image object," the physical substrate, be it canvas, pigment, film stock, which supports the image; and the subject that is depicted in a portrait or perhaps some fictional creation, a centaur, for "example".

The inconsistency between the image, its physical support, and its subject makes us experience the image both as an image and as an actual thing. The painting as a physical thing hung on the wall in a room is in the real world, but the image-scene appearing in the painting is not. It may represent, for example, a unicorn, but the unicorn conflicts with its real surroundings – the room where the painting is hung. There can be no further experience of the depicted scene beyond the picture's frame. The differentiation between image object and image subject is essential to the concept of image. The former is though analogically similar to the latter, yet it can never replace the latter. Husserl insists on the distinction between the two. A picture or a photo is always imitating something beyond itself. However, is such a distinction sustainable for the digitalized virtual object, in particular a game object?

An object in the game world is based on computer hardware as well as software. The image of game object is the graphical result of complex programming. It depends upon the material conditions to a large extent. The game object presents itself on the screen and the object refers to something else – plants, animals, streets, human beings or monsters. Seen as such, the phenomenological concept of image-consciousness seems to fit the game object very well.

Yet, in dealing with the distinction between traditional media and digital media, the Danish theorist Espen Aarseth asks the question: is "fictional" (imaginary, as Husserl would put it) a good way to depict a computer game? Is it appropriate to characterize the game world, including the game object, the Avatar and the whole narrative structure of game world as fictional? Aarseth questions such a viewpoint so long as we compare, for example, the figure of a dragon in a movie with that in a computer game. (Aarsth 2007: 36) Although the audience of a movie can be affected by such a figure, no interaction can happen between them. The audience has no chance to act on figures in a movie to make them different. In contrast, the interaction between figures and players is fundamental to computer game. The ending of the game remains open, a fact that makes a computer game tremendously different from movie.

Aarseth grants that there can also be fictional elements in a game world. There are things that present themselves on the screen but that have no reactions at all to the inquiry or action of a player. Such things can be seen to be purely fictional. A door that cannot be opened is fictional, the player cannot make another adventure behind that door. That a door can be opened signifies that more can be experienced after the door is opened. Using the terminology of Husserl, the openable door is perceptual, whereas the fictional door is purely imaginary. The latter is like a picture hung on the wall, purely decorative. Because the game object is more than imaginary, Husserl's conception of image-consciousness does not seem to fit in the framework of game objects very well.

II. Game object as intentional object, and as interplay of perception and imagination

The computer game creates its own reality, with its own environment replete with, for example, tunnels, city streets, human figures, monsters and vehicles, which are based on the algorithms of the computer simulation. That means, such a reality is mathematically structured and determined. Each game is a "dynamic simulated world with its own spatial and temporal dimensions and dynamic relationships of virtual forces and effects." (Aarseth 2001: 299) The game world lets the participant play an active role, where he or she can test the system and discover the rules and structural qualities in the process. It is also a dynamic real-time experience of intervening with sets of algorithms that model any environment or process.

An analysis of game objects aims at what is disclosed in the experience of game playing, that is, what appears to consciousness. It does not inquire into the question as regards what lies behind the gameplay, even though what appears on the screen depends to a large extent on computer hardware as well as software. While they are the pre-condition for computer games, these things do not constitute the essence of a game. A game is a game because a player is involved, the game is something meaningful to the player during game-playing. Not only the game as a whole is meaningful, but also the content or objects that are involved in the game. In order to illustrate this point more closely I would like to refer to an example given by Aarseth. (Aarseth 2011: 11)

It involves two games. Form the viewpoint of computer mechanism or algorithm, no difference can be found between them. However, whereas the first one (Vote Dean for Iowa) may amuse players in general, the second one ('Kaboom' – the suicide bomber game) might disgust players. The significance of a game can be very well illuminated by such an example.

The distinction between mechanism and gameplay is decisive when we stick to the intentional analysis of game object. We do not go behind what is disclosed to consciousness. Instead, we focus on the analysis of what is going on with the consciousness of the player, of what he experiences. The intentional analysis aims at the analysis of the co-relation of consciousness and its object. The co-relation between consciousness and object does not simply mean that a connection is built between two separate realms: consciousness and the physical world. Denouncing such a presupposition Husserl focuses on phenomenon which is characterized through intentionality.

The thesis of Husserl is: intentionality means consciousness is consciousness of something. "Something" denotes that it is loaded with some meaning. Wherefrom comes such a meaning? How is it given? In Husserl's view, the act of consciousness has its contents: seeing entails some visions, hearing some voices, eating some flavors, and in hoping some wishes. These contents are depicted by Husserl as hyletic, or reell elements. They are diversely complex; some of them are even often out of our notice. What do we know about them? Once we pay attention to them, they begin to organize themselves to become something. They become the focus of our consciousness. This is what happens when some meaning emerges in our consciousness. Regarding this stage, one should not overemphasize the act of attention, because even when we do not actively pay attention to our consciousness-life, we passively do focus on something. Our consciousness in daily life alternate between different focuses. Some meaning is often replaced by another, and such alteration goes on and on and on. Now the question arises as regards the emergence of meaning. What happens when something becomes something for consciousness? In daily life, we usually experience something without question. Yet a further reflection reveals that when we think we experience something as a whole, we experience actually only a tiny part of it or we never experience anything without starting from a certain perspective. While we experience just a tiny part of something, we experience that "something" as a unity. Why is that?

Every experience happens only once, it comes up and fades immediately along with the contents contained in such acts. Once this is true, does that mean that nothing permanent can be experienced unless we keep it continuously present? The early Husserl struggles with such a question. He observes

that even though we count 2x2 on different occasions, that is, in various consciousness-acts, we nevertheless recognize every time the same validity that 2x2=4. There is something that lies beyond the act of consciousness. There is something that remains the same even when every status of consciousness is very different. Husserl concludes that what consciousness can do is far beyond its immediate contents. It points beyond itself. In an analogical way, we might answer the question raised above: why can the experience of a tiny part of something lead us to point to the unity of such a thing? In Husserl's view, this is attributed to the intentionality of consciousness. Consciousness is not confined to its present domain, it points to something far beyond itself. It can happen in ideal objects in logic or mathematics, it can be also revealed in perception of physical objects.

Consciousness does not only have hyletic, reell contents, but also transcendent objects as its correlates, which are intentional. Each intentional object is subjectively intended as a unitary object. An intentional object is intended mostly by way of a significant sign, picture or image, or even just vague thought. So long as it remains an object as such, it is merely intended, not fulfilled. Fulfillment is mainly conditioned by intuition. The intentional object will win a new status through fulfillment, and we are assured of our knowledge of it. (Hua XI, 10) I may claim that a dinosaur tramping alone a main street of Kaohsiung, but I can hardly make my claim true so long as the chance for fulfillment of such an intentional object through intuition is rather low, it lacks what Husserl coins as evidence. But what about the game object in the game world, which is rendered virtual? In what sense could we say that it is intentional? How is the game object to be determined phenomenologically?

In order to answer this question, a more detailed explication about horizon is necessary in such a context. The inner horizon implies the possibility of how the object may display itself and the ways it has been in the past. The adumbrations in the future are potential compared to the present adumbration. The object seen as such is always related to the infinitely open, possible adumbrations. Some of the open possible adumbrations remain dead potentialities, (Hua XI, 13) whereas the others turn into expected adumbrations, according as how the process of perception runs. (Hua XI, 12) All these expected adumbrations will show up according to the kinesthetic structure of the perceiver. In this regard,

Husserl stresses that though the way the object shows itself is indeterminate, it is yet in principle determinable. On every present perception there is the potentiality that other adumbrations will come up. There is always the plus ultra for the object, for this reason there is never an ending of the appearance. (Hua XI, 11) The other adumbrations transcend the present adumbration and it is impossible for the process to come to an end.

Now back to the question regarding the object in computer game. In order to determine to what extent it is an intentional object, let us first of all distinguish two levels of objects in a computer game. One of them refers to the whole scene on the screen in computer game. The other refers to the objects and landscape except Avatar — the replacement of the player in the computer game. The former signifies that even the avatar is objectified as an intentional object. The ego of the player is so to speak objectified. He is distinguished from the player outside the game, who dictates the ego on the screen, that is, in the game, to carry out the assignments that are demanded. The second case signifies that the whole screen disclosed to the player is no other than the environment or objects that are experienced by the player. This used to be called "first person perspective".

As indicated above, the thesis of Husserl regarding intentionality is: consciousness is consciousness of something. Now, what is this something in a computer game? What does the game object mean to the player? In the computer game, in particular in the 3-D games of today, the object stays constantly fluid, according as the player turns his angles or positions. This results in the change of size or shape of the object that appears. How then can we say that these game objects remain the same, or they are what they are with identity? This is very much comparable to a normal perception or an object in the life-world. So long as the object in perception can be seen to remain identical due to intentionality of consciousness, i.e. apprehension, so can the game object remain the same in spite of constant changes. This is based on the intentionality of the consciousness of player. The game object is undoubtedly an intentional object. The intentional object goes beyond the various consciousness-acts, it can be recognized as the same object in different modes of perception. The intentional object is the correlate object. It is no longer the reell content of a consciousness-act, but goes beyond. Now the question arises as regards what

this consciousness belongs to? Whose consciousness is it after all? Is it the consciousness of the player or the consciousness of Avatar, the replacement of player in a computer game? Can the latter case be reasonable? How can Avatar, a simulated character, be viewed as having consciousness? My contention is that, making Avatar a conscious being is the necessary condition of game-playing.

So long as Avatar replaces the player during the game-playing, it also experiences the game-world on behalf of player. During the game-playing, the game object is more significant to the Avatar than to the player himself. (Klevjer 2012: 21) That is to say, there is correlation between the consciousness of Avatar and the game object. Only on a second level can we say that there is the correlation between the player and the game object. On such a level the Avatar is counted as one of the objects, he is so to speak the objectified subject in a game.

Besides inner horizon, the object has also outer horizon. The object itself is located among other objects, appear against backgrounds. The horizon of game world should extend infinitely much the same as that in real world. Yet basically such a world is constructed by designer, analogical to a fiction or movie. As long as no fictional reality can extend infinitely, so should no horizon of game world extend infinitely. Such a fact can be easily understood so long as the player steps out of the game world, i.e., when he no longer plays the role of Avatar. (Klevjer 2011) In terms of phenomenology, this is similar to making a transcendental turn, i.e., no longer so immersed in the "reality" that he used to assume but brackets it. It is in this moment that he gains a new perspective about himself, about what he or she has been doing. In terms of game-playing, when the player steps out of the simulated character of Avatar, he or she assumes a position about what Avatar has been doing, and how the game world has been disclosed to Avatar till then. Right at this moment, the player realizes that he or she, incorporated in Avatar, has experienced the game world as a reality, but after withdrawing from the game, the player views the game-world as no more than virtual.

The game object is real to Avatar, so is it real to the player during the time when he plays the game? The game object fulfills the intention of the player, that is, he can experience the game object in as many aspects as he desires in different

occasions with the kinetic function of Avatar. A game, however, has a narrative structure. Due to such a structure the outer horizon cannot extend infinitely. It is instead limited, and such a restriction reveals the demarcation of its reality. It counts on a certain narrative structure in order to seem real, but for the same reason it cannot be definitely real. While being intentional, it is also virtual. Game object can thus be regarded as mixture of reality and unreality.

We saw from the beginning that game object is basically image on the screen. Yet it is not only image because it is rendered as reality during the game-playing. During the game-playing, so long as the simulated image is perceived by the Avatar that is animated and controlled by the player, it is closer to perception. When the player leaves the game, the image on the screen loses the validity as a perceptual object. It recedes to the status of pure image. Such a situation is comparable to the puppet of a puppet-theatre. It is activated during the performance, but it is no longer alive after the theatre performance comes to an end. Viewed as such, the sharp distinction between image-object and image-subject seems to become vague, whereas an interplay of perception and imagination becomes more and more clear.

But no matter whether a game object is closer to perception or imagination, it is intentional object. An intentional analysis focuses mainly on how the game object is revealed to consciousness and we conclude that so long as a game object is neither solely pure perception nor solely pure imagination, it can be rendered as interplay between perception and imagination.

Conclusion

A game object is complex. It is far beyond Husserl's framework; yet, I hold that, no matter how complex it may be, it is intentional. It fits the framework of intentional analysis. As long as intentional analysis has priority to physical analysis, it does not focus on how the game is based on physical or digital requirement. It focuses on the interactive sphere between subject and object, on the in-between of player and game object, on how the player experiences the game world. To sum up, the intentional analysis helps reveal the core of the computer game experience. It also helps disclose the intentional character of the game object.

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