Article

Digital Games, Image-Consciousness and Superreality

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This paper argues that digital games are best understood as a type of image-consciousness (*Bildbewusstein*). First, I argue how our experiences of digital games are not perceptions. Second, I provide a summary of the phenomenological natures of three basic modes of consciousness in Husserl, Fink and Sartre—perception, phantasy and image-consciousness—in order to demonstrate that the latter ultimately finds its place between the other two. Lastly, I spell out the implications and contributions these insights can have for our understanding of digital games, including their quite unique character and force. Indeed, once one understands digital games as a quintessential instantiation of this intermediate kind of consciousness, one can also better understand the immense pull digital games can have on us, not least their 'superreality'.

Introduction

This paper argues that digital games are best understood as a type of image-consciousness (*Bildbewusstein*). I will use key insights from Husserl, Fink and Sartre in order 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 its own experiential category. Moreover, because of its intermediate nature I will also show the peculiar 'superreality' of such a category, in that it can take up and combine the best elements of both perceptual and imaginary worlds. In this manner, this new phenomenological perspective will have numerous implications for singling out the quite unique power, captivation and status of digital games.

The argument proceeds in three main steps, each with their own section. First, I argue how our experiences of digital games are not perceptions, as they are usually considered in the philosophy of games literature, and I engage with the most relevant. This leads to a summary of the phenomenological natures of three basic modes of consciousness in Husserl, Fink and Sartre—perception, phantasy and image-consciousness—in order to demonstrate that the latter ultimately finds its place between the other two. I

then spell out the implications and contributions these insights can have for our understanding of digital games, including their quite unique character and force. Indeed, once one understands digital games as a quintessential instantiation of this intermediate kind of consciousness, one can also better understand the immense pull digital games can have on us, not least their 'superreality' and general 'magic' both in quite technical phenomenological senses.

Digital Games are Not (Straightforward) Perceptions

In the last fifty years or so the domain of games has become staggeringly more intricate and digitized. With ever-increasing computing power, the industry is now colossal. Along with the usual types of games played for amusement and to attain goals, there are also games with no set objective (e.g. *Minecraft* (from 2009)), casual games (e.g. *Bejeweled* (from 2001)), artistic and independent (indie) games—the list goes on. Indeed, although the majority of people might only be familiar with mainstream 'triple-A' (AAA) games like the *FIFA* (from 1993) and *Call of Duty* (from 2003) series, as well as more recent phenomena such as *Fortnite* (from 2017), the more one delves into gaming and game studies the more one realizes it is a complex and sophisticated universe unto itself.

Upon further investigation into game theory—not least game studies and the philosophy and phenomenology of games—one realizes that much work has also already been carried out. However, there remains a rather serious oversight, or even an error. At a Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference in Turin, Italy, in 2018, I was surprised to hear most speakers talking about how digital games are 'perceived' or at least involve 'perception', even though all of it takes place on a screen or through a headset. Another instance of this assumption is a book by Keogh (2018), whose subtitle to *A Play of Bodies: How We Perceive Videogames*, for me kind of says it all; it is more often than not simply assumed that we 'perceive' videogames because they involve some of our physical senses, as well as a very clear and concrete interaction with external and physical things like controllers, keyboards, screens and headsets.

I hope any reader has already realized that the case cannot be so simple, and it should certainly not just be presupposed. Works such as Keogh's make many valuable insights into the phenomenality and nature of the gaming experience, such as elements of embodiment in videogames. However, until this basic question is cleared up, I fear many of the analyses will remain skewed, if not simply incorrect and on the wrong theoretical and phenomenological foundations, as I will argue.

The dominant discourse in game studies and the philosophy of games, which are both heavily influenced by phenomenological ideas and insights, is strange because classical phenomenological analysis actually reveals that gaming experiences are decidedly not perceptions, at least not straightforward ones. The very fact that they are experienced through screens and the like, never use all of our senses completely, and thereby

are always still distinguishable from the perceptual, already shows they have a fundamentally different phenomenological structure. The experience of various digital games, especially nowadays with the technologies' higher realistic capacities, can be 'as if' one is experiencing perception-like qualities. However, the precise point here is the *as if*. For example, although first-person shooters (FPSs), especially now and surely to continue, are becoming increasingly realistic, we still inherently know that we are not actually being shot at, that our life is not actually in danger—that, in short, if we die in the game, we can simply 'respawn' and are not actually dead. This is phenomenologically very significant; even though the gameplay and realism can make us feel as if it might be do or die while we are immersed in the game, we always implicitly know that it is and remains a game, which is to say not real and thus not a matter of actual and complete perception.

Of course, digital and other games have perception-like qualities, predominantly of vision, sound, as well as some touch, movement and proprioception—the technologies for which are improving greatly and rapidly at that. This, however, is a far cry from saying they are perceptions, or even involve them. Indeed, according to the modes of consciousness I will present here, involving one or a number of physical senses does not necessarily make the experience perception; perception is a complete experience and structure with real-world consequences. What is more, if digital games were perceived in this sense, how would we even be able to distinguish games from reality, digital and virtual bullets from real ones? This basic point already shows there is some kind of basic difference, one we need to understand more completely.

Philosophical and more metaphysical studies have made progress in the acknowledgement that digital games' objects are experienced as virtual as opposed to actual, which can then allow them to have (a level of) reality of course. This would be a non-phenomenological and totally acceptable vocabulary for talking about the 'reality' (as opposed to actuality) of digital games for example, with this distinction ultimately stemming from Bergson's philosophy, and subsequently popularized and stressed by Deleuze and some scholars in philosophy (for example, Ansell-Pearson 2005; Smith 2009). What is more, this discourse has also made its way into the work of a number of philosophy of games scholars, and could even be seen as the dominant one. Juul's work *Half-Real* (2005) characterizes games as between real and fictional worlds, which he has also reiterated more recently (2021). For his part, Calleja thematizes a similar point by situating the virtuality of computer and digital games between the real and the imaginary (see: 2006; 2008). In both cases, games are between real and not.

More recently, Vella and Gualeni (2019) are careful to show the difference and relation between actual and virtual experiences, with digital games falling into the latter category while still being greatly capable of influencing the former. In this manner, even a brief look at some of the most relevant literature already shows that many inroads

have been made with regard to the experiential nature of digital games, not least the very plausible characterization that they involve virtual objects and experiences which nevertheless stem from, and can have great influence upon, actual and real ones.

I do not think the same attention has been given to the basic nature of perception in the literature. This often comes from silence with regard to a crucial question as to whether actual and real are the same, as well as how the two might need a complete perceptual apparatus or not. As mentioned, it is fine to make a Deleuzean distinction between actual and real, where the virtual can then be a type of real. However, this should be explicitly argued for, and even if it is done, the analyses will still fall short until perception itself is fully addressed (something which Deleuze does not do). Once this is done, I think the most plausible answer is that real and actual are phenomenological synonyms, meaning the virtual is something else and is therefore at the very least not a straightforward case of perception.

More often than not the terms 'perception' and 'to perceive' are not even defined or looked at for themselves in the games literature; they are just used, very often in rather loose and fast manners. For instance, Asheim (2012) looks at the issue of 'reality' and 'pretense' of objects in digital games from the perspective of Ingarden, but this again largely bypasses the more fundamental issue of perception. Coppock argues (2012: 274) that 'we can conceive of computer games as ontologically real since they embody aspects of three principal types of cultural units—*material, immaterial* and *mediated cultural artifacts*' without ever, again, getting into the true phenomenality of the experience as opposed to other ones (for example, actually playing tennis over against playing a tennis computer game). This oversight becomes blindness when Ijsselsteijn and Riva (2003: 6) state 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 a claim, from a rigorous phenomenological perspective, is quite staggering because it does not even consider that a restriction of stimuli in one world, namely to only some limited and digitally mediated elements of vision and audio and touch, might already change the very nature of experience of such a world, even to the extent that it is misguided or simply incorrect to apply the term 'perception' to it in this context. Similarly, even Calleja, who is well aware of the differences and interrelations between real, virtual and imaginary (with the second between the other two), manages to employ a rather indiscriminate use of terms like 'perception' and 'agency' in his own definition of virtual environments (2008: 14 (bold in original)): 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 and situation?

Although it has been acknowledged by others that 'digital embodiment differs so significantly from primordial embodiment that any idea of total immersion is simply fantasy' (Farrow and Iacovides 2013: 221), the more widespread trend (see, for instance: Brown and Cairns 2004) seems not to really be aware of this and, more importantly, of the reasons why. For me, it comes down to the infinitely complex nature of perception, and indeed the way a significant portion of the games literature simply takes and uses this term unquestioningly shows its uninformed and unphenomenological character. This is in fact the point: although the philosophy of digital games has already produced many insights on the nature of the objects of digital games (see again: Juul 2021), 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 find it is not a case of perception, but something else.

Perception, Phantasy and Image-Consciousness in Husserl, Fink and Sartre

In Husserl, perception both presents objects *tout court* and yet, strictly speaking, one is only ever directly aware of various 'aspects' (*Abschattungen*) at any given moment. Even given this detail perception is always about a *physical presence*; as experienced in our everyday, naïve, pre-reflective 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*: '[p]erception 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*. (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) in a Humean sense (i.e. impressions or perceptions as opposed to ideas or images). To give a simple example, when I walk out of a room, I implicitly and impressionally know that this room will continue to exist without me perceiving it; it is in no need of me at all, it follows causal natural laws in a complex physical nexus, and it will also be there to be perceived again in a regular manner when I go back in.

There can be all sorts of 'modalizations' as Husserl terms it, 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 in Husserl is necessarily inexhaustible, situated, perspectival, synaesthetic and kinaesthetic, embodied in spacetime, and horizonal. These are the essential characteristics of Husserlian perception. On the other side, the case is very different with our phantasies. 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' ([1898-1925] 2005/1980: 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 (e.g., this chair), but I do not have to, and even if I do I know they are not actually there before me when I close my eyes, like in a case of physical and actual perception right in front of me. In this manner, it belongs to the very structural fibre of perception to posit its objects as existent; in phantasy not. Quite the contrary, in fact: 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 (a chair or 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. 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) that 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 remain rather sane and 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, which is another tell-tale sign); or one kind of hesitates between the two without really doing either. 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. Husserl has many expressions for this type of consciousness, with two of the most striking being 'perceptual imagination' (cf. ([1898-1925] 2005/1980: 86/79) and '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 and consequences. In a nutshell it is characterized as a distinct mode of consciousness that seems to contain elements that are both there (are real, perceivable) and not (are irreal, phantasizable). When I look at a photograph, for example, there are actual, perceived elements that are evidently there before me (the physical photo); and yet the photo also depicts something

or someone that is decidedly not there, perhaps never was, and perhaps can never be (again) (e.g., my grandmother).

Ultimately Husserl's image-consciousness has a structure of its own, with three essential components that nonetheless always already interlock in any 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, VR headsets) 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, meaning a digital game is also 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 for 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 and networking 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 an actual experience all fused in a live 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. In a word, we do not perceive pixels but automatically see images as images.

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 digital 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 form of consciousness with 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, who present contrasting ideas as to the fundamental nature of image-consciousness.

With Fink, one of the main goals of '*Vergegenwärtigung und Bild*' ('Presentification and Image') is 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 digital games.

For Fink, image-consciousness is ultimately a unity of two, not three, essential components: consciousness of the '*real "carrier"*'[1] (ibid.) and the '*"image world"*' (id.: 73). These forms of consciousness are fused in our lived experiences of the representational artefacts, but can be phenomenologically analysed. 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 differ-

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[1] All translations for this text are mine.

ence between image consciousness and phantasy for Fink; the carrier means there is an external physical element to image-consciousness that phantasy does not have and that thereby 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 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. 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 this latter.

The image world is obviously the second essential element, that which the physical materials portray. Together the two components are always already fused in the phenomenal experience, making these 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.

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. In Fink's words, '[t]he unreality of an image world can essentially only be an abstract moment of a determined reality' (ibid.). This means for Fink the realm of image-consciousness is between the realms of pure perception and phantasy. However, because

of its physicality ultimately image-consciousness 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. In a word, under Fink's rubric it may be considered as a special, transcendent form of perception.

Writing in French, Sartre ([1940] 2004/2005) does not use the term *Bildbewusstsein*, but 'the imaginary' (*l'imaginaire*), notably for *both* mental phantasies (e.g., a unicorn) as well as external, physical media like digital games. Indeed, 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 digital 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 psychophysiological 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, our lived bodies and their 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.

Sartre's thesis is that not only in perception, but also in phantasy, we are always already outside, inherently geared towards transcending way beyond ourselves. This how-

ever 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 digital 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, engaging and interacting with digital avatars and the like, as well as one another. 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 almost never 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, this experience is also at bottom of a Sartrean imaginary structure where external and complex physical phenomena combine with our own psychophysiological analogical materials, thereby allowing us to transcend way beyond our seats into the gaming experience.

In sum, no matter the particular phenomenologist or set of vocabulary, none of these experiences are simply 'perceptually' present on the screen in a phenomenological sense; they are all ultimately images designed precisely with our inherent and wonderful capacity for image-consciousness (Husserl and Fink) or the imaginary (Sartre) in mind.

Image-Consciousness and its Relevance for Digital Games

We have just seen three of the foremost phenomenological thinkers on the natures of perception, phantasy and image-consciousness. Now of course there are different theories and disciplines besides phenomenology, with cognitive neuroscience (see: Gazzaniga, Ivry and Mangun 2019) as well as AI philosophy (e.g. Floridi) both very successful

and popular nowadays. Instead of seeing these different disciplines as being at odds with each other, they should be seen as complementary to a highly intricate, complex and indeed infinite field of study. Where phenomenology excels is in first-hand description and conceptualization of direct lived experience, other disciplines may formalize and support these insights through more third-person and reflective evidences like images of brain activity and the like.

What remains here is to show how this rather new phenomenological picture with specific reference to digital games can bear some more conceptual fruit. We have seen that with Husserl, Fink and Sartre, 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 there seems to be quite a bit of serious disagreement on the issue of image-consciousness, 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 digital games?

To answer the first question, image-consciousness is either mode in its own right (Husserl); a special kind of perception (Fink); or a part of the imaginary with an external component but the same form (Sartre). These 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 which are necessarily combined with elements of our own psychophysiology. Thus, even though there are significant differences in terminology and even positioning, all are agreed that image-consciousness (or the external imaginary) is a unique experiential category between full perception on one side, and pure mental phantasy on the other.

With the ever-increasing presence of technologies such as digital 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 digital games comes in. Indeed, I hope it is now clear that playing a digital game is a paradigmatic 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 a transcendent and virtual game world. It is thus essentially a structure of image-consciousness (Husserl and Fink) or the external imaginary (Sartre), and actually makes the differences in terminology rather moot. Indeed, the key is that all three agree it is *not* a case of (straightforward) perception; digital games of course use materials from the perceptual world, but they allow us, by their very structure, to interact with a transcend-

ent, digital object that does not need to obey all the laws of perception 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 (e.g. flying). 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, as are the real consequences. In short, we know we are in an *as-if* situation in the latter.

Digital 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 digital games use situatedness, perspectives and kinaesthesis, all of these are again in an imaginary, as-if and ultimately limited 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 infinite order of perception.

As digital 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 (see also: Juul 2021). Of course, some games already approach audio, and even visual, reality quite well (there are even purely audio games), and there are also rising tactile and proprioception advances, particularly in head-mounted displays (HMDs) and their accompaniments. Nevertheless, these advances remain a far cry from becoming utterly indistinguishable from our perceptions, and it is moreover a matter of speculation whether this would ever be possible for, or even desired by, game designers, who like to employ many magical elements along with the perceptual. Indeed, I would say digital games are so engrossing, captivating and immersive because they take up many vital elements from perceptual life, but they also add and infuse many captivating and non-perceptual elements. 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: digital 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. This is what I term their powerful and quite unique 'superreality'. Indeed, many digital 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, realistic and even mundane in a quite literal sense. 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, or be an F1 driver—and so many digital games harness the lifelike qualities of our perceptual experiences while *also* always adding and combining more fantastical and imaginary elements, to varying degrees obviously.

Superreality is thus at once realistic and fantastical—it combines both in a mesmerizing and enticing way. Digital games have inherent imaginary structures but also take up many elements from perceptual reality; this combination creates phenomenal objects that are neither just real nor purely phantasized, but are a forceful combination of the two—superreal. In a word, digital games, from *Mario Kart 64* (1996) to *Fortnite* (2017), have all been taking the best from both worlds already for decades now.

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

I dare say a not an insignificant number now feel more at home in such computer worlds. 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. Sartre even argues that many people, not least artists, opt for primarily imaginary lives ([1940] 2004/2005: 146-148/282-285), and we 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 a choice for such a life.

It is all these points where thinking in terms of image-consciousness rather than perception allows us to provide new theoretical and phenomenological insights with regard to digital games. They are not perceptions, no, but precisely because of this they combine reality and irreality quite magically and captivatingly as the designers so choose. On this note, one could maybe argue that all media of image-consciousness do this, from novels to films. What, then, would set digital games apart? They are definitely on the side of complex audio-visual-tactile images, and in this sense already surpass films because they usually involve more senses and systems thereof. On top of this, a widely accepted demarcating characteristic is their interactivity, not only in the sense of actually controlling items in the game worlds, but also how the complexity of games, as well as their storylines, options and developments, all involve the psyches, thoughts and values of their players—often intersubjectively—way more than perhaps any other media.

In this manner, although there might not ultimately be any fundamental structural difference between different objects of image-consciousness—e.g. a book and a digital game—the content, detail, sensuous interactivity and strong superreality of digital games more often than not singles them out from other media, even television, films and more run-of-the-mill smartphone apps and engagements. These latter definitely have some of these elements to varying degrees, but usually not all to a consistently high degree.

All media are experienced as image-consciousness by definition. Nevertheless, digital games, especially because of their interactivity and superreality, are of such a strong form they can even supplant the force and pull of perceptual reality, as well as imagined mental fantasy. They do this through their multisensorial design and interactive engagement, but also the plethora of complex and highly varied 'affordances' they give one on and through the screen or headset. These affordances are controlled and selected by us through these multimedia analogical materials that consume quite large portions of our psychophysiology, as well as our desires, tastes, emotions, values, thoughts and reflections. Thus, the superreality of digital games also speaks to the particularly strong and engaging tenor of this particular instantiation of image-consciousness, which looks set to only augment in the future as technology and design develop and improve even further.

The 'magic' of digital games also entails a captivation to the point where the gamer is in a manner of speaking outside of herself; she *is* the character or avatar in the game, transcending laws of physics and perception through the digital medium. This does not mean that the gamer and the technology are totally fused, or that our minds are literally and directly controlling the avatar—our lived bodies (*Leibe*) and all the tech are still all needed, and always will be in some form. Moreover, although immersion is a real phenomenon, one always remembers one has stepped into a game and one always steps back out again, if only to perform real everyday functions the game cannot provide (e.g. eating). Nevertheless, the way games are developing the magical and operational powers could increase and become more embedded and less obvious, which would mean the boundaries between person and machine would get even closer too. Even in such a scenario though, one is still a long way from everyday perceptual life being rendered absolutely indistinguishable for game life (including the stepping-in and -out moments), even if the values and time spent have already been transferred to the latter for some.

Conclusion

I have argued that our experiences of digital games are not actually about perceptions but are a special structure of image-consciousness, according to the principles of classical phenomenology. This means our experience of digital games are neither straightforward perceptions nor pure phantasies, but an in-between mode where physi-

cal machinery interacting with our lived bodies allows us to experience transcendent and interactive virtual objects that need not obey the laws of physical perception, and do not harbour the irreversibility or finality of the latter either. I engaged with the games literature on the matter, and showed where this insight was lacking. I then spelled out the phenomenological nature of image-consciousness as structurally and conceptually between our perceptions of full realities on one hand, and our phantasies of pure irrealities on the other. Ultimately, we have seen that our experiences of digital games give us access to quite a unique and powerful phenomenal category I call superreality, meaning they can combine real and irreal elements in highly enticing and interactive ways, therefore giving them a special place not only in many of our personal lives, but also in phenomenological theory.

I believe the conceptual and phenomenological issues in this article are important to understand because it is first of all important to know the basic differences between acts of perception, phantasy and image-consciousness. Indeed, although it is important to note that digital 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 digital games march on, therefore, many are starting to develop more complex analogical materials which cover aspects of our lived bodies that were not possible before. Head and hand movements of various virtual reality (VR) technologies now immerse one much more in an environment that feels increasingly real and lifelike. Indeed, a number of designers may 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 digital 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 for many, an increasing *Ready Player One* scenario where many people simply prefer to exist in such worlds than deal with the actual one is certainly possible. There is nothing wrong with this in itself of course; 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 and unsatisfied. Digital games can of course teach one a lot about one's self and others, even in ways perception cannot; 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 digital games also leaves the powerful advantages open to abuse, and this is thus a pitfall that should be understood if one is to guard more against it.

I hope to have shown that digital games and their designs are not ultimately about perception and replacing reality, but are more engaged in developing image-consciousness and intriguing new mixtures of superreality, with all the magical and captivating components that come with this.

Games

BEJEWELED. PopCap Games, from 2001.
CALL OF DUTY. Treyarch/Activison, from 2003.
DOOM. id Software, MS-DOS, 1993.
FIFA. EA Sports, from 1993.
FORTNITE. Epic Games, PS4, 2017.
MARIO KART 64. Nintendo, Nintendo 64, 1996.
MINECRAFT. Mojang Studios, from 2009.
ROCKET LEAGUE. Psyonix, PS4, 2015.

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