

Game body: the medium for analyzing "Objects"

YongJie Ma

School of Film-Television and Communication, Shanghai Normal University, 200000 Shanghai, China

Abstract

The body is a significant theme in contemporary philosophy, closely related to the issue of the subject. In video games, the body manifests in three distinct forms: the game machine's body, the player's body, and the character's body, offering new perspectives on understanding this medium. On one hand, Heidegger's distinction between things and objects and his questioning of things provides room for reinterpreting the three-dimensional bodies that construct the field of play and their relationship with the thinghood of things. On the other hand, starting from Foucault's later concept of spirituality, tracing the essence of the gaming world and the relationship between games and players helps us coexist more harmoniously with games, thereby gaining a clearer understanding of the issue of subjectivity within this complex network of relationships.

Keywords

Thinghood, spirituality, video game, body.

1. Introduction

In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially classified "gaming disorder" as a disease. This seems to provide an official confirmation for those who have a biased view of gaming, suggesting that playing games is inseparable from the notion of "losing oneself in trivial pursuits," even equating it directly with such notions. So, what exactly makes games so appealing? Is it the creation of a virtual space where players can temporarily escape the various disappointments of real life, releasing desires suppressed by reality? Or is it the unique experiences that immerse players in a "game perspective" entirely different from the real world? Another question to ask is why it is called "Playing with 'objects' to lose one's ambition"? Players are clearly engaging with a virtual electronic game. If we reduce the electronic game, which forms an integrated meaning, to mere objects, we narrow down the essence of the game itself. Without the active participation of players, electronic games are merely static digital codes. Furthermore, players infuse their consciousness into the game characters, making them agents in the game world. However, this assumption that players are in a dominant position is fundamentally flawed. Therefore, we must understand how the game world is constructed. In the early Heidegger, we understand the unfolding of the world as "a readiness formed from the position occupied by the body, in which it establishes relations with things and presents them as a state within the world of beings around it, and this collection of states becomes the readiness of Dasein." [1] That is to say, the unfolding of the world is based on our bodies. Merleau-Ponty also proposed the concept of "body schema," pointing out that the world we perceive "is actually a world constituted by the coherent schema of our body." [2] Therefore, when we try to understand the composition of the game world, we find that we also start from the position occupied by a gaming body, establishing relations with various objects in the game world, thereby generating a meaningful game world. Returning to the mistake, when we speak of "playing games" without hesitation, the player's subjectivity is assumed. Why do players who are in a dominant position become addicted? Because in the digital age, "a machine perception bypasses our subjectivity; our bodies and subjects have already been mediated by new

perceptions." [3] In this sense, whether it is the player's body or the character's body in the game, they are both dis-objectification. Together, they construct the physical interface of the game, so it is not just the player who is playing the game; the game is also "playing" the player. This may be the deeper reason for game addiction. Therefore, the subjectivity reflection in video games might still need to return to the body as the original medium, to understand the bodies of characters like Cody and May in <It Takes Two>, or the bodies of various heroes in <League of Legends> who wear different metal gear, perceiving their true thinghood. The relationship between the character's body and the player's body should be at a point of rupture, in an alien place, in a dissimilar place. Only when the character's body increasingly approaches its own thinghood can the player's body awaken the immersed consciousness, realizing that they are playing a game, thus moving toward their spirituality.

2. Thinghood: the dis-objectification body and immersion, restraint or limitation

Heidegger emphasizes that the thingness of things "is not in being an object of representation, nor can it be defined from the perspective of the objectivity of objects." [4] Here, we are startled to find that things are typically recognized by us in the form of an "object in a ready-made state" (Vorhandenheit), where the object, through our bodily labor in the world, is obscured by its usefulness and function. From this philosophical viewpoint, in video games, whether it is the character's body or the player's body, they are often dis-objectified into some kind of object to achieve game objectives, thus causing players to become distracted from their bodies and reality, immersing them in the interactive experience of the game. However, as a special kind of "thing," the body is not only an object of observation but also a subject of action, capable of perceiving, moving, and influencing the surrounding world. Its true thingness is revealed in this action. Therefore, to achieve the de-obfuscation of the body's thingness, it is necessary to make corresponding distinctions among the multidimensional bodies that construct the game space.

2.1. Digital body and player body

2.1.1. Character Body: "Willing to be used"

In video games, the digital body primarily consists of the NPC character's body as programmed and the player-controlled character's body. The former is endowed with "digital consciousness" through programming, passively awaiting interaction with the latter, while the latter moves through the game world under the player's control, following a set path. Together, these two form the digital body within the game space. Clearly, they lack the material reality of real-world objects, so do such bodies retain their objecthood? Heidegger points out that "the very thingness which makes things into things can no longer be a thing, i.e., no longer a conditional thing; it must necessarily be something non-conditional." [5] Therefore, in Heidegger's sense, incorporating the digital body into non-being is not his original intention, as this would make the definition of things conditional. Instead, he chooses to define the mode of existence of things through their relationship with Dasein, specifically the state of being-in-the-world. Through the laborious activities of the body, we form a certain relationship with things, and this "familiar associative state between our bodies and things is presented as 'being-in-the-world.' "(Zuhandenheit) [6] Thus, it appears that the digital body in the game world does indeed exist in a state of being-in-the-world. For the NPC character's body, it forms a state of being-in-the-world with the player-controlled character's body. For example, in League of Legends, a player who chooses to play a jungle champion will habitually farm in the jungle after the game starts, thereby establishing a state of being-in-the-world between the jungle monsters and the player. Similarly, the relationship between the player-controlled character's body and the player itself follows this pattern. This relationship between them is embodied in this usefulness, where the NPC character body is seen as gold coins, experience and other forms, and the player's

controlled character body is seen as an agent for the "kill all" game experience, and the digital body loses its thinghood in a depersonalized form.

The customizable and functional nature of the digital avatar's body constructs an operable, play-withable, and depersonalized body. This body no longer possesses its own independence but exists in the game space merely as an object for the purpose of play. The gamers who interact with it only recognize its surface as something they are willing to use. This depersonalization is also present in game design; immersion is a crucial quality of games. Both the player's avatar and NPC bodies are pre-set and optimized according to the player's needs and game objectives. The rejection, hidden, and obstructive nature of the player's independent life is buried under "willing to be used," overlooking the internal and complex nature of the digital body, thus obscuring its thinghood.

2.1.2. Game machine body: "organ prosthetique"

The game body, as a symbolic construct, refers to the material existence that builds the game world, such as game controllers, keyboards, speakers, and VR goggles. These tangible objects, though placed between players and games, often go unnoticed. Their presence is designed for specific gaming purposes; no thing how intricately crafted the game controller or how well-matched the VR glasses are with human eyes, players tend to focus more on the dynamic symbols and images in the virtual world, along with the various gaming experiences they bring. The game machine body merges with the player to achieve an "on-hand state." However, it is difficult to categorize this body as a digital object because it is indeed a physical entity, yet it is also hard to classify it as a real-world object because it is not intended or easily perceived within the game. Perhaps we can view it as a "organ prosthetique," meaning that "the human body is impoverished; he can use various tools external to himself as his external organs to reconstruct his relationship with the world and construct the surrounding world for humans." [7] From this perspective, the game machine body serves as an external organ extended by the player to build the game world. Its significance lies in its use, existing in a subject-object relationship where the player hardly perceives its substantiality. The weighty thinghood is almost imperceptible, and the virtual game world and various floating image landscapes obscure the objectivity of things. The game machine body becomes a de-materialized body.

But is this generation of organ prosthetique an extension of the player's body or an extension of the character's body? We naturally assume they are external organs of the player's body, through which players can play games better and immerse themselves more deeply, obscuring their physical nature. However, this is just one aspect. On the other hand, players must use a digital identity (game account) to enter the game world, allowing them to issue commands to the character and truly operate the game character. In this process, various habits, sensory experiences, and even emotions (such as heart rate) of the player are converted into digital signals, becoming constantly evolving data. "These do not open up to the human subject; behind them, data operates according to its own logic algorithms, dominating the overall space in ways we cannot perceive." [8] This is why various organ prosthetique can be continuously updated to better serve the player. Thus, we introduce the most important aspect of constructing the game space: the player's body.

2.1.3. Player body: "digital signal"

When playing games, players first exist as individuals. According to Merleau-Ponty's concept of "body schema(le schéma corporel)," the game world is perceived through the interaction between the player's body and the game machine's body. In this sense, the player's body is the player themselves; it is not merely a passive receptacle for sensory signals but an active participant in constructing the game world. However, when players control joysticks and keyboards, focus their gaze on the screen, and become fully immersed in the game world, the game machine's body "diverts the player's attention from their actual body and the surrounding

environment as much as possible, drawing the player to stay in the screen world for extended periods, achieving immersion." [9] Their various bodily reactions and behavioral habits are also recorded by the game machine's body, integrated into the game data stream, influencing the development and experience of the game. This immersion not only blurs the boundary between reality and virtuality but also, to some extent, projects the player's bodily perception onto the character, leading to a forgetting of the thinghood of their own body.

For example, in <Detroit: Become Human>, the character's body is created through real-time motion capture. Kara, as a bionic helper for family life, is almost indistinguishable from a human body. When Kara comes off the production line, her movements and poses suggest the image of the goddess Venus, and she realizes that she is alive. Players can truly feel Kara's inner vitality and sincere emotions. When she witnesses little Alice being abused by her father, her sense of resistance drives her to flee with the girl. At this moment, she is no longer just a bionic person but a mother. The game's soft and warm scenes seem to hint at this transformation. A character body that closely resembles a human body becomes an agent for players in the game world. The game's interactive mechanics grant players different choices, influencing the course of the game through their decisions, while also reconstructing the relationship between the player and the character to some extent. Each decision made by the player is an exploration of a possible future, which seems like a game of life, as expressed in the game: "This is not a fictional story; this is our future." But as Ian Bogost writes in the preface to <Play Anything>: "Life really isn't a game, and I don't want your life to be one either." [10] players still live in the real world.

We follow this line of thought and diverge. When players focus their attention on the character, exploring various possibilities in the game world, they overlook the physical nature of their own bodies, which become mere digital signals perceived by the game machine. Players immerse themselves in the virtual game world, while the real world seems irrelevant. However, the "mind" can be fully immersed, but the corporeal existence cannot be altered. Therefore, "the real world is not a safe haven that provides shelter for your adventures in the virtual world; now, games are the ultimate sanctuary, and the real world persists with the body as an uneradicable 'remnant' and an irreparable 'scar.' " [11] This is why the game world seems to create a paradox worth pondering: gaining a sense of immersion requires immersion itself, which demands distraction or even forgetting about physical reality and the body. The pain of reality constantly acts upon the player's body, reminding us of our close connection to the material world. Thus, games serve as both a refuge from reality and a closely linked part of it. So, are players immersed in the virtual game world, or do they maintain a restrained attitude toward games?

2.2. From restraint to limitation, coexistence with things

In response to this paradox, perhaps we should shift our perspective. This is not a binary choice; it's not an either-or relationship. If players are fully immersed in the game world, will they truly experience joy? Similarly, if games can be addictive, can players solve the problem by restraining themselves from playing or outright refusing to play? Clearly, this is not the case. As mentioned earlier, complete immersion is merely a utopian myth. The joy derived from playing games quickly fades away once the game ends and reality resumes. Addiction, in essence, is "wanting to stop a behavior but being unable to do so." [12] Forcing oneself to refrain from gaming seems to be just a modern form of asceticism, emphasizing the principle of refusal rather than attention, treating the result of refusal as an ultimate and permanent outcome. [13] This leads to games not receiving the attention they deserve, overlooking the intrinsic value worth pursuing within them.

To inquire about the intrinsic value of overlooked games, it is necessary to return to the essential characteristics of games, that is, "games as a 'fundamental human activity.' " [14] Thus, the body that labors in the surrounding world needs to be reconsidered. First, the actions of non-NPC characters in the game world seem like a process of escaping reality, but in fact, they

are only within the bounds allowed by the game's programming. Here, the game itself already imposes a limitation, and the non-NPC character's body, with player consciousness, labors and explores the game world under this constraint. It is within these constraints that players gain their experience of the game, "the more restrictions we add to the experience, the more interesting the results become." [15] However, players do not realize that these constraints are prompting a kind of thinking about things; the digital bodies of objects, as well as the labor of digital bodies in various objects within the game world, distance them from their thinghood in the satisfaction of the game experience. Second, the game machine body, as a proxy organ, may only truly reveal its thinghood when it is constrained, that is, when it no longer serves as an intermediary between the player and the character. However, the game machine body is not designed for constraint, so its thinghood manifests when the player stops to pay attention to its existence. Finally, the player's body, as a digital signal, clearly loses its autonomy as a being-in-the-world, being perceived as data by the game machine body without any limitations, better serving the iteration of the game machine body. What the player should do is not to refuse to play the game or refuse to be perceived, because it also shapes a digital "I" in the game space, but to respect the game and not to look at the game with expectations, constantly interact with it through physical labor, and explore the infinite possibilities hidden in the game. These two reconstruct the form of the player as the subject.

Regardless of whether the body is in a virtual game world or the real world, it has its thinghood aspect. However, during gameplay, this material aspect is often obscured by functionality, and through physical exertion, all things are also closed off in this process. As material bodies, they also possess the ability to act; players should respect the complexity and independence of various entities in the virtual world, avoiding treating them merely as tools or objects. Instead, they should be seen as living beings with unique modes of existence. Therefore, "thing is not simply a passive object, a passive item, or something lifeless, but an existence composed of tension, capacity, and hidden power, all of which are in constant exchange." [16] Thus, playing games is not about escaping the real world or immersing in a virtual game world, but about participating in this world and coexisting with all things.

3. Spirituality : "The art of survival" and the subject's turn

If games are not life, then they are most likely a form of "cultivation." Players can achieve spiritual elevation and training through the process of overcoming challenges, experiencing failures, successes, learning, and growing. When players engage in games, their bodies are not merely material entities; the numerous practices and cognitive experiences formed within the game world offer them a profound spiritual journey, presenting an extraordinary art of living. What is spirituality? Foucault defines it as: "the purification, asceticism, renunciation, self-concentration, and transformation of existence that the subject uses to shape itself in pursuit of truth. These practices, not for knowledge but for the subject and its existence, become the price of reaching truth." [17] According to this definition, "spirituality" in the game world first manifests as the transformative power that players discover through gaming, altering their relationship with themselves and achieving the truth of existence. It is not just a spell that immerses players but a technique of "retraite", "a way for humans to temporarily detach from reality, not just physically changing their physical position, but mentally separating themselves from their real-life circumstances, remaining unmoved by what happens around them." [18] Therefore, players achieve clarity and openness in truth by exploring and enhancing their spiritual abilities within the game world.

3.1. Physical training and mental exercise

How does the act of achieving this result occur? In his archaeological study of subjectivity and truth, Foucault discovered that in Greek culture before Socrates, the importance of "the art of

living" was overlooked in contemporary times. The "art of living" concerns the specific scenarios of one's own actions and the art of addressing a series of issues arising from these actions. [19] From this perspective, achieving this result requires engaging in concrete practice and reasonably responding to the problems triggered by such practice. Video games provide an experimental field for exploring the art of living through specific practices. However, to enter the game, or to achieve "withdrawal," one must first construct bodily interactions within the game space. Therefore, the exploration of spirituality and the clarification of truth need to be analyzed from two aspects: physical training and mental exercises.

In the game world, physical training manifests in two major categories: player body training and character body training. The physical aspects of game machines primarily reflect their thinghood, which will not be elaborated on here. For player body training, the most direct example is the dance machine in arcades. These games require players to follow dance steps, effectively enhancing coordination and various bodily functions. More advanced training involves improving certain physical skills through games. For instance, in the game <Beat Saber>, players use VR glasses to fully engage in sword swinging actions, gradually learning a form of swordsmanship through the inertia of chopping blocks. This type of game focuses on player body training and is not typically categorized as a game where players control characters' bodies. In other game worlds, player body training integrates character bodies, emphasizing attention, decision-making ability, adaptability to environmental changes, and reaction speed. For example, in the classic adventure game <Fireboy & Watergirl Elements>, players must maintain intense focus on controlling Watergirl or Fireboy; otherwise, the gaming experience is extremely poor. During this process, reaction speed also improves. Similarly, in the creation game <Minecraft>, players control characters Steve or Alex in a seed world, facing various dangers. Players need to adapt to rapidly changing environments and decide on their survival and development paths. These different levels of physical training are not only for players to improve different physical functions, but also for their spiritual growth.

Mental exercises are reflected in players' exploration of the game world and their deeper reflections on the game. The game provides an environment distinct from but not detached from the real world, offering players different life experiences that stimulate mental exercises across various dimensions, such as moral training, ethical choices, and philosophical reflections on life. Through these mental exercises, players can deepen their self-awareness and understanding of universal truths, achieving a spiritual and psychological elevation. For example, when faced with questions like what "love" is and how one can acquire the skills to practice "love," opinions may vary widely for the former, while the latter might be ambiguous for most people, as there is no specific or universal metaphysical theory about "love." Love is a spiritual experience, and the truth contained within this "spirituality" is not a definitive truth; it does not involve judgments of right or wrong, clarity of good and evil, or distinctions between them. [20] However, games may offer a more direct experience of this spiritual experience. In <It Takes Two>, Cody and May, a couple whose relationship is about to break down, reluctantly embark on a fantastical adventure to transform their doll-like bodies back into human form. In this process, they help each other to complete tasks, discover various symbolic objects that they had previously overlooked, recall the scene where Cody proposed to Xiaomei on the snowy mountain, watch fireworks together, and Cody helps Xiaomei regain her confidence. When all these experiences are completed, Cody and Xiaomei embrace and kiss. We believe that every player can have their own unique experience of "love," the truth about "love." This is the spiritual and emotional experience that the game brings to players.

As a "retraite" technology, games allow players to enter a heterotopia where they can freely explore their own selves. In this process, through physical training and mental exercises, players not only acquire the art of survival skills and decision-making but also discover spirituality and

elevate their spiritual nature within the game, achieving a transformation that clarifies truth—a form of self-cultivation.

3.2. Truth "rebound"

In this transformative practice of self-changer, players discover the spiritual dimension of the game and uncover its transformative power, thereby reaching the truth. And "once the path to the truth is opened, the truth will have a 'returning effect' on the subject." [21] The truth is "what clarifies the subject; it bestows true happiness upon it; it grants peace of soul." [22] From this perspective, while playing the game, players not only experience the truth but also more importantly, the feedback and guidance from the truth, leading to a fulfilling state of existence. In **Duo Ren Cheng Xing**, when a couple brings Cody and Xiao Mei through the game, if they encounter similar situations in their future lives, they are likely to recall the truth about "love" experienced during the game, which can change their life circumstances to some extent. If they have children, they will also remember Rose's self-reproach for her parents' emotions and her hope for their reconciliation. This is the return of truth in the game, leading to a deeper understanding of the aesthetics of existence.

In this way, the deeper essence of game truth becomes evident, deepening players' understanding of the world and making their perception of their own bodies, consciousness, and existence clearer. It is like a lighthouse floating on the sea, guiding our course and helping us understand our true selves, thus enabling us to live and grow better. Perhaps this is a crucial aspect of Foucault's later thought: "The goal of the subject is not to replace ignorance with knowledge. The goal for an individual is to achieve a position of subjectivity that he has never recognized throughout his life." [23] This position of the subject may have already been transformed when game truth becomes apparent and truth turns back.

4. Subjectivity reconstruction: video games like you and me

Everyone hopes to recognize their own subjectivity; everyone wants to be the subject. Just like in games, players can express themselves within fewer constraints, even believing this is their true self. We all know that "becoming a subject means independence, sovereignty, and agency. Being a subject is good, while being an object is bad." [24] But why don't we affirm the object? Without objects, how can the subjectivity be confirmed? Players in games can indeed stand high above under certain limitations, but games also exist as sentient entities. Just as the player's body becomes a digital signal in the game world, influencing and shaping the rules, limitations, environment, and narrative of the game, the player's participation constructs the potential agency of the game. This agency makes the player vibrant. Therefore, games are no longer passive and lifeless; instead, they actively and creatively participate in the player's reshaping of their own transformation, making them exist like you and me. Games, with their seemingly passive object status, stimulate the emotional, mental, and even physical activities of the player, this "subject."

From this perspective, games inherently possess a dynamic tension between thinghood and spirituality. Players are not merely embodied in physical bodies; their bodies also conceal the fusion of thinghood and spirituality. Therefore, when playing games, players are no longer isolated subjects but co-create a new subjectivity with the seemingly passive object of the game. As a result, traditional notions of freedom, independence, and agency are challenged in the realm of gaming. This knowledge about subjectivity may also fail to guide us in recognizing and confronting reality. In contrast, games provide an experimental field for reconstructing subjectivity. They do not directly impose a truth on you, nor do they passively accept so-called truths from players who interact with them. Instead, they encourage players to actively participate, perceive, and even create cognitive processes related to the essence of truth. Without players (subjects), games (objects) cannot exhibit their richness and complexity, and

vice versa. For this reason, we can draw an initial conclusion from the issue described at the beginning of the article: playing video games is not about losing one's will to achieve greatness through indulgence in material things. On the contrary, playing games involves exploring and understanding the complex network of various object-oriented elements within the game, leading players to discover the intricate and intertwined relationships between games and self, games and world, and games and truth, ultimately uncovering the true meaning of life.

When players no longer treat games and character bodies merely as objects to manipulate at will, there is one point that is often overlooked: in the game, players can assume different roles, hold various positions, or even be all-knowing deities. However, it is crucial for players to remember that we are always exploring possibilities within a virtual space. Ultimately, our reality is the tangible world we inhabit, and we must return to this physical existence. Here, games like those of you and me do not focus on the physical aspects of characters or androids in games like <Detroit: Become Human>. Instead, they emphasize the overall nature of the game as a whole, influencing the player's subjectivity. Therefore, when players return to real life, it is essential to understand the material dimension of character bodies, especially those of game machines. What they should show players is how these entities manifest themselves and assert their subjectivity.

In video games, we should strive to discover those unknown aspects of ourselves. By playing games, we can uncover the transformative relationship between the subject and the self. Through gaming, we should gain a deeper understanding of the truths of this world and our own truths. Gaming is not just about immersing ourselves in digital worlds; it is more about how we can transform ourselves, allowing our life forces to spread far and wide, thereby achieving a more complete and autonomous subjectivity.

Reference documentation

- [1] Lanjiang: How to Think about Global Digital Capitalism? -- Philosophical Reflections under the Theory of Contemporary Social Criticism (Shanghai People's Publishing House ,China 2024) p.33,p.35,p.45,p.150,p.40,p.142. (In Chinese)
- [2] Heidegger: Collected Works of Heidegger. Speeches and Essays (Commercial Press, China 2018)p.179.(In Chinese)
- [3] Heidegger: The Quest for Virtue: Kant's Doctrine of the Principle of Transcendental Reason (Shanghai Translation Press,China 2010)p.8.(In Chinese)
- [4] ShiYi Wei: Towards the Convergence of Metaverse: The Change of Video Games and Digital Body, Journal of Literary Theory Research, vol.43(2023),p.52-60.
- [5] Ian Bogost: Play Anything (CITIC Press,China 2018)p.V, p.165,p.167,p.172. (In Chinese)
- [6] Yuhui Jiang: "Play is modesty, not liberation" —— As a game of control, counteraction and self-control, Journal of Exploration and Debate, (2019)No.4,p.84-91+159.
- [7] Heit Steyer: The Suffering on Screen (Shanghai People's Publishing House,China 2024)p.55,p.48.
- [8] Foucault: Subject Interpretive (Shanghai People's Publishing House,China 2005)p.16,p.17,p.145.
- [9] Yusheng Du: Subjectivity and Truth -- Foucault on "caring for oneself", Journal of Foreign Literature, (2017) No6,p.78-87.