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Hugging Pixels

How Gaming Rethinks Physical Interactions

With a year of COVID-19-induced confinement, everyone's lives have drastically changed. They were obviously marked by loss, mourning, and pain, carried by the spread of the infectious disease. Beyond that, they were heavily affected in their most basic organization and articulation, in an unprecedented way. Pre-COVID, activities could easily be divided between "inside" and "outside": while that distinction could take different forms depending on each person's situation, it seems nonetheless important to see that both work and leisure organized themselves around this understanding of space as a binary. The space in which we have been confining ourselves could also be understood in terms of a different binary. Instead of an inside/outside dichotomy, it is now defined as online/offline. That is to say, activities are determined by the capacity that we have to complete them over the Internet or not (e.g., remote work, classes, thanksgiving dinners, ordering groceries, dates, etc.). This new binary thus forces us to consider our environment in terms of the "real" confined space we live in, with the sense of isolation attached to it, as opposed to the "virtual" of a new form of social life during a pandemic. In enacting this spatial shift, many have thus needed to adapt to a new life online, one that is more deeply anchored in the virtual than it used to be. In that sense, I observed with some amusement my Facebook friends complaining about a life where all leisure and social interaction had to be done online. Amusement because, as a gamer, that *is* my life, and it has been for a long time before COVID.

In this paper, I want to look more closely at the ways in which social interactions occur online, specifically in a gaming space. I am more precisely interested in the ways in which physicality is enacted in a virtual gaming space. In order to examine those issues, I choose to start with a general discussion on physicality in itself and how it can be discussed in relation to media which are not meant to convey it (i.e., audiovisual). I will complete my argument with two different cases: one is a discussion of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) interactions, more specifically *Final Fantasy XIV*, which I approach both through the lens of my own personal experience playing it, and through a discussion of the show *Dad of Light*, as it makes use of the game itself in both its narrative and in its cinematography. This part of my paper will center around the possible embodiment of an avatar, and the ways in which said avatar communicates "physicality" back and forth with the player of an MMORPG. My second case revolves around Virtual Reality (VR) and how physicality in that scenario compares my discussion around MMORPGs.

Sensorial Oxymorons

In titling my paper, I chose to go with a seemingly impossible action: hugging pixels. Pixels, after all, are merely constitutive elements of a digital image, they are intangible: how could they possibly be touched, or hugged? In order to understand the oxymoron here, I want to first define the "virtual," borrowing the definition from William R. Sherman and Allan Craig:

> "A virtual world is the content of a given medium. It may solely exist in the mind of its originator or be broadcast in such a way that it can be shared with others. A *virtual world* can exist without being displayed in a *virtual reality system* (i.e., an integrated collection of hardware, software, and content assembled for producing virtual reality experiences) – much like play or film scripts exist independently of specific instances of their performance. Such scripts do in fact describe virtual worlds." (Sherman & Craig, 6)

We can thus argue that a virtual world, or a virtual object, is an idea which is conveyed to us through mediation. As we cannot experience it in the raw of its originator's mind, we have to rely on other elements (such as scripts) in order to approach them. Starting from this concept of the virtual as a mediated idea, our mind is easily drawn to the most current forms of mediation: writings, drawings, movies, music, etc. In other words, media that rely heavily, if not exclusively, on two of our senses: sight and hearing. From that understanding, it becomes clearer that touch is often left aside when it comes to conveying the virtual.

We, as consumers of narrative media, typically have to engage with the diegesis through our sight and hearing. Yet our experience of audiovisual media is never exclusively tied to those two senses, as is argued by Laura Marks in *The Skin of the Film*:

> "Especially at a public movie theater, sensory information of all sorts abounds. We are aware of the movement and warmth of the other people in the theater, as well as their whispered or shouted comments on the activity on screen or elsewhere. Smells of popcorn and all sorts of other food, perfume, cigarette smoke (in the old days), body odor, cleaning products, or mildew from musty theater seats: any of these may address the sense of smell so insistently that it is hard to pay attention to the audiovisual image on screen. […] In short, the cinema viewing experience, taken as a whole, is already multisensory." (Marks, 211-2)

As Marks argues, the experience of going to the movie theater (typically considered an audiovisual experience) is never only about sight and hearing, and it includes other senses, such as the smells described here, but also the tactile feeling of the theater's seat, or even the taste of popcorn could be argued to be a part of the audiovisual experience itself. All of these perceptions, however non-diegetic, participate in the movie-viewing experience and create an appropriate sensorial atmosphere. Marks's consideration of media thus goes beyond the object we typically consider (the movie itself) and englobes the environment and rituals of media consumption as part of the experience. Taking from Marks, we can thus argue that even in a massively audiovisual mediatic environment, there can never be an experience that is deprived of other sensorial

experiences. In that sense, "touching" the virtual becomes less about a sense of touch that has to

do with a diegetic element, but rather one that is tied to the experience of spectatorship as a whole.

In this perception of the act of the viewing, the spectator is completely passive: they are a

sponge that soaks up their sensorial environment, without necessarily engaging back with the

media (here, film) in front of them. In that regard, Linda Williams offers a different point of view

in her essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," in which the viewer is not just acted upon,

but also reacts to the movie they are watching:

> "In the body genres I am isolating here, however, it seems to be the case that the success of these genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen. Whether this mimicry is exact, e.g., whether the spectator at the porn film actually orgasms, whether the spectator at the horror film actually shudders in fear, whether the spectator of the melodrama actually dissolves in tears, the success of these genres seems a self-evident matter of measuring bodily response." (Williams, 4-5)

Here we see that the viewer takes a more active role, as they do not simply perceive their

environment, but act back at the medium in terms of a mimicry of what they perceive on screen.

Their own bodies are thus influenced by the medium, and the success of said mediatic object is

even determined by the strength of the bodily reaction it provokes. While my reading of Marks

proposed a distinction between senses interacting with the diegesis and senses interacting with the

environment of the mediatic experience (and therefore independent of the mediatic object),

Williams lets us think of an experience that is mimetic, almost synesthetic: even when simply

watching and/or listening, other senses can be actively solicited by the mediatic object. It thus

becomes more possible to consider an interaction with the virtual object, even if only conveyed

through audiovisual forms, that also engages with the sense of touch.

Hugging Pixels

The specific, typically audiovisual medium that interests me in this paper is that of (online) video games. A number of games do offer elements beyond the audiovisual: the simple vibration of a controller upon a hit or in a tense cutscene is, in fact, a solicitation of the sense of touch. Yet, the medium itself is broadly perceived as audiovisual, and as offering little haptic (i.e., tied to the sense of touch) interaction. What interests me here is less the examples in which there is a conscious attempt at a haptic gaming experience, and more the ways in which given games already achieve a sense of bodily presence, despite it not being their main design.

From my personal experience, online gaming has always offered a richness of social interactions which I did not have in my immediate, physical surrounding. This manifested in the way of making friends from Denmark, Portugal, Mexico, or the United States all the way to Singapore, while remaining in my Parisian apartment. Those interactions themselves are assuredly the reason why I can speak English to such an extent today, and why I was able to transition to a life in the United States without feeling too violently uprooted. My online friendships nonetheless puzzled people around me, who wondered how friendship without any physical interaction (or perspective thereof) could possibly work. If anything, my friends were perceived as pen pals, even though to me it felt like there was a physical component to hanging out with them on a near-daily basis. Part of the reason why is because, in a sense, we were physically together: not with our own bodies of flesh and blood, but rather, embodied by our game avatars.

In the specific context of MMORPGs, game avatars are usually personalized and made the player's own. By this process, the player can create their own character, as opposed to embodying a pre-made protagonist (e.g., Geralt of Rivia in the *Witcher* series). I would argue that customizing an avatar carries importance in the perception and articulation of the self, as it allows to deconstruct

an idea of a singular "ego" centered around our physical body and to replace it with a society of the self, as articulated by Sherry Turkle in her article "Cyberspace and Identity":

> "To use analyst Philip Bromberg's language (1994), online life has helped Case learn how to "stand in the spaces between selves and still feel one, to see the multiplicity and still feel a unity." To use computer scientist Marvin Minsky's (1987) phrase, Case feels at ease cycling through his "society of mind," a notion of identity as distributed and heterogeneous. Identity, from the Latin idem, has been used habitually to refer to the sameness between two qualities. On the Internet, however, one can be many, and one usually is." (Turkle, 645)

The avatar as a fragment of the self, then, is not simply a handy device, but becomes an interface, a medium, in the same way that our own physical body acts as a medium between "us" and the real world. The avatar is effectively our body inside a given virtual environment. Thus, the process of character creation (and naming) can sometimes be confusing to someone who is not used to the idea of creating such an interface.

The show *Dad of Light* on Netflix is based on a real story, detailed in a Japanese blog, about the "Dad of Light Project" in which a gamer introduced his 60-year-old father to the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XIV* while concealing his identity online. It highlights important moments of the discovery of online gaming spaces, starting with that of character creation, in which the son helps his father to build a character. The choice of an online name, highlighted as comedic in the show, is also an element of the real story, recounted as follows:

> 「名前はどうする？実際の名前はあかんで？」 しばらく考える父・・・。しばらくのち・・ぼそりと・・・ 「じゃあ・・・・いのうえ。」 え？誰？？
>
> いやいや・・・世界を救う光の戦士の名前よ！？そんな近所にいそうな名前でいいの？？ 　井上さん？ (Blog: "光のお父さん。")
>
> "What about your name? You can't really use your real name." Dad thinks for a second… and another… and whispers… "Hm, then… Inoue." Huh? Who is that?

No no no… is that the name of a Warrior of Light who saves the world?! Is it really okay to have such a pedestrian name?? Mr. Inoue? (Translation mine)

The avatar, from its very creation, is problematized in terms of its need to be differentiated from reality. It cannot be "likely to be found in the neighborhood" (the literal translation of 近所にいそう) and needs to be demarcated from any sense of reality. The need for a special name also highlights the fact that the father, by attempting to name himself "Inoue" (a rather common name in Japan), had failed to embrace his entrance into a fantasy. The definition of fantasy given by Laplanche and Pontalis is helpful in understanding the issue in his choice of name:

> "Imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing the fulfilment of a wish (in the last analysis, an unconscious wish) in a manner that is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes." (Laplanche & Pontalis, 314)

By adopting a pedestrian name, the father had utterly failed in embodying a protagonist. In the words of his son, "is that the name of a Warrior of Light who saves the world?!" Here it seems thus essential to the integrity of the Dad of Light Project that the father truly engages in the fantasy of the game, as it will become the only way for a relationship to develop in the virtual space. If the father fails to pour himself into his avatar and to achieve a sense of identification to the body on screen, it then jeopardizes the project through which his son will be able to reach out through the use of this virtual space. In that sense, the in-game avatars become vessels through which a relationship can express itself in ways that seem impossible to achieve in reality. That is not to say, of course, that father and son (in the case of the real story) had a bad relationship to begin with. Rather, the online interaction is envisioned as a way to develop something more, something that is not only inexistent but seemingly unachievable in the real world.

As we see a scene of the father confronting a Treant Sapling (a high-level monster in the starting zone, programmed to stay passive unless provoked), the son immediately fears for his father's "death" and comes to his rescue. As a response, and not knowing how to use the chat function of the game, the father instinctively does something that many players recognize: he runs around the other player, before leaving. In a later scene, which is a repeat of the same encounter, the father will instead use the emote function, and have his character kneel, thus prompting nostalgic memories of the real-life father kneeling in front of his son when he was a child. These elements show what I want to call a "disembodied physicality." That is to say, a physicality that is enacted without a tangible body, but through the means of a virtual avatar. Although there is no direct physical interaction (touching) between the father and son's avatars, there is nonetheless a physical element to their communication, as the father uses his avatar's body to communicate his gratitude and emotions in a form of limited sign language.

This sense of disembodied physicality is precisely the feeling I described in the context of my own online gaming experience: there is a specific quality to avatar interaction that simply cannot be found in text or vocal chat. It is quite frequent when talking in-game to end up meeting "physically" (i.e., with each player's avatar) with an interlocutor, only to have one's avatar run around aimlessly while having a discussion. There is no purpose to those actions in terms of the game itself. However, they serve a stronger sense of physical presence, beyond that of a bodily sensation, for the people involved.

Hugging the Air

I have so far mentioned games that have, if any, a very limited sense of haptic interaction: MMORPGs, with the prevailing example of *Final Fantasy XIV*, are games that are mostly audiovisual, and not meant to stimulate any haptic sense in the player. They were thus useful in

exploring Linda Williams's idea of a media that elicits, in an almost synesthetic way, physical sensations without them being actually enacted upon the body. In this part of my paper, I want to turn to Virtual Reality (VR) games as a different system, specifically in how they are designed to engage more senses (and specifically touch) than regular games.

In their discussion of VR, Sherman & Craig highlight different ways in which one can attempt to motivate the sense of touch through a gaming device. Such devices can make use of a player's joints (i.e., making them move their arms, legs, fingers, head, etc.); apply a specific temperature, texture, or even electrical current at given moments; limit movement in relation to either the body or to an object; provide the player with an object of a specific shape that matches the diegetic item being held (e.g. the guitar-shaped controller to play *Guitar Hero*), etc. (Sherman & Craig, 181-184) In other words, VR has many tools at its disposal to engage our haptic sense in more than a mimetic or synesthetic way: an electrical current or a given texture or temperature will provoke a physical discomfort, where Linda Williams's examples resulted from a process of identification or mimesis to the situation witnessed on screen. In Virtual Reality, embodiment is therefore fairly different from that observed in an MMORPG: where a game like *Final Fantasy XIV* requires the player to disregard their physical body and project themselves onto an avatar as their vessel, the VR system allows the player to directly use their own body and to transfer it to some capacity into the diegesis of the game itself. It is therefore not a disembodied physicality, as the body of flesh and blood is at the center of the gaming experience.

I want to bring up my own experience on a popular VR application, *VR Chat*. In that game, I have mostly interacted with a friend whom, although I have yet to meet physically, I am very close to. We have interacted through instant text message, voice-only chat, video chat, MMORPGs, and VR. As I mentioned earlier, there was already a qualitative difference between our interaction

with and without avatars, in terms of a feeling of closeness and "disembodied physicality" that we could share within the context of an MMORPG (or other cooperative games with avatars). This came to such an extent that, upon first using video chat, I already felt familiar with my friend's body language and facial expressions, despite having only seen them in very few pictures before. When using VR, the way in which we interacted was further changed: in MMORPGs there was a sense of wanting our avatars to be close to one another even though there was no such need to be able to communicate. We simply wanted to "see ourselves," in our avatar embodiment, replicate a natural situation of discussion while standing next to one another, or at least being in relative physical proximity. This was often accompanied by the use of emotes or other game elements to express ourselves (for instance, using a "hug" emote). VR, and specifically *VR Chat*, introduced a different perspective on those interactions. In *VR* Chat, the proximity of avatars is a requirement for communication, to the point that two players standing at opposite sides of a huge virtual room would not hear themselves well. The game thus forces a sense of physical closeness and inertia that is close to what we experience in a real-life conversation. Furthermore, the use of emotes had to be supplanted by our actual gestures. At times, this means reaching out to one another, or even awkwardly hugging the air, glitching through each other's avatar. The reason why I mention this experience is to bring up the fact that despite the apparent awkwardness of "pretending" to hug, to high-five, or to poke one another, we nonetheless did it, and it brought a physical element to our interactions, regardless of any actual haptic stimulus.

I want to think of this experience as one close to synesthesia: the visual impression that we are hugging provoked a feeling satisfying enough that we were willing to engage in miming an actual act of physical interaction. Yet, it seems quite different from more typically synesthetic experiences, such as associating a musical note with a color, despite not actually "seeing" anything.

Here, there is an actual physical engagement, in the form of two halves of one hug, each enacted physically by each player. The association of senses is thus not purely mental but rooted in the willingness of the player to engage in a one-sided act of physical interaction, which is only reciprocated in terms of a visual stimulus.

For this sentiment, I would propose a neologism, "phantesthesia." That is to say, a ghost (*phantasma*) sensation (*aisthesis*) of physical interaction, despite the fact that the subject is engaging into a physical act on their own. Hugging the air, or reaching out towards something that one can see but not feel, becomes akin to attempting to embrace an illusion or a specter: it is there for one sense, yet not for the other, but we choose to engage with it with all our senses nonetheless.

Using the concepts of disembodied physicality and phantesthesia side-by-side, I hope to obtain a better understanding of how physicality can be articulated in virtual spaces, depending on the means at hand. This consideration would lead me to consider the extent to which as players, we engage ourselves with the game's diegesis, and end up becoming a part of the virtual world itself.

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