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“Virtual Re-embodiment: The Answer to User Presence in Video Games ”

Kirk Besmer’s writing on virtual re-embodiment focuses on the relation between a user and a video game to distinguish the technological relation from Don Idhe’s embodiment relation in what he calls virtual re-embodiment. The unique aspect that allows this distinction is the user’s conception of presence while playing. Using the philosophical ideas of body schema and body image as described by Merleau-Ponty, I attempt to argue that Besmer is correct in thinking that the relationship between a person playing a video game and the video game is unique enough to garner its own philosophical categorization. I would also like to argue that someone playing a video game is also still experiencing hermeneutic and embodiment relations as described by Don Idhe.

To work from the ground up, let’s explain the concepts of hermeneutic and embodiment relations as described by Don Idhe. Then we can see how these relationships are present while playing a video game, while also exposing the deficiency in explaining the phenomena of presence for the user. The hermeneutic relation is best explained as the relationship between a person and technology where a person interacts with technology by reading it to interpret the world. In the hermeneutic relation, the user is not in direct connection with the world but the technology is. Only by interacting with the technology does the person have any connection with the world. When someone is playing video games the monitor or screen is the technology that lives in this relationship. In the game Super Smash Brothers there are many stages where the users can fight one another. We will take for example the stage Final Destination. The way the user interacts with Final Destination is by reading the screen. When a stage loads up and the

user wants to explore, understand, and interpret it, they must look at the screen. Although there aren't words on the screen, the visual cues that give you an understanding of how far the stage goes and your character's placement in it are on the screen. To see and know the world of Final Destination, the user needs the technology of the screen. The next relationship at play during a users gaming experience is the embodiment relation. It is explained by Don Idhe to be the interaction with technology where a person embodies the piece of technology to connect with the world. This differs from the hermeneutic relation because the piece of technology is not directly connected to the world unless embodied by the person in the world. This embodying takes place when the person takes up the piece of technology in a way that is transparent, or akin to an extension of themselves. When this occurs, transparency continues throughout the user's more direct interaction with the world. In the example of playing Smash Bros., the controller lies in the embodied relation. The controller becomes so transparent, that most skilled players do not need to look at it. The user plays with the controller in such a way that it is easy and not a hassle. The controller is not too heavy that his hands get tired and it is ergonomic in a way that gives comfort. One could say that the controller has become an extension of the user's body.

However these relations do not fully entail what is happening in the experience. For example, the hermeneutic relationship usually connects a person to the real world, not one that is virtual and can be anywhere and everywhere. The stage Final Destination simply does not exist in one living room but in multiple places at the same time. To answer this, one can take a book that tells a fictional story to see how the hermeneutic relation stays intact. Analogous to Final Destination, the world the user is presented to in a fictional book is not the one they physically exist in. Especially when told in the third person, these stories are very much characterized by the perspective of an outsider looking in. But something else happens when written in first person where the reader assumes another presence. It is similar to the user with a video game. The embodiment relation cannot answer the question on how multiple people that

are physically present in other places, can be playing the game online and say they are presentially at Final Destination. This question of presence is usually answered by the embodiment relation in the following manner: If someone is holding a controller, their presence is usually in the same place. However in this case of video games, the presence of the user is not as connected to the person's physical body like other embodiment relations. The kind of presence of the user is connected to the virtual character the user has chosen. The controller moves a character whom the user assumes personhood of in this other world. The user sees the character as himself in the game, even though nothing that happens in the game has contact with the user's physical body. Besmer tries to solve this phenomena of the user's presence through invoking Merleau-Ponty's distinctions of body schema and body image.

Merleau Ponty describes the concept of body schema in a way that fits rather well with the embodiment relation. The body schema relies on a bodily connection between a user and a piece of technology. A pair of glasses or cane may serve to understand this. The user needs these tools to be integrated with their body so that they can interact with the world around them. The transparency in the relation is achieved when the user has fully embodied the tool where it does not get in the way of things. So unless someone's glasses kept slipping or a man's cane just snapped in half, the experience the user has with the world is as if the technology was not there. In other words the body schema is a person's bodily makeup that includes technologies that have been embodied. We correctly assigned the relation between the user and controller as such. The body image then has to do with something else that I will argue as being mindful. The body image relates to how one perceives themselves in their conscience. When taking the example of one's physical body, a person has perceptions of where their bodies are and how much room they have to move at a given time and place. These perceptions in themselves are part of the person's body image. Another aspect of the body image is a person's perception and belief that they are too fat or not muscular enough. In both these cases the body image is correlated to a person's projection of themselves in a bodily sense. But when applied to how a

user perceives themselves in a game, one must rather oddly conclude that their body image is the character on the screen. They have projected their personhood on the character. The body that they are perceiving to have room to run or to fight is not their body schema but the pixels of the character. The perception the user has when they say “I am dying” is not bodily either but reflects their body image in the game. In simple terms when the person is playing the game, their presence is in the world of the game, as the character in the game. The issue of the user’s presence is put to rest in the body image.

To summarize all the relations, a user is in a hermeneutic, embodiment, and re-embodiment relation at the same time. He is connected bodily to the screen hermeneutically as he uses it to interact with Final Destination. Final Destination or any other stage serves as the world that the technology is presenting to the user according to the relationship. The embodiment relation lies in the bodily relation the user has with the controller. The transparency between the controller and user allows the user to have a body schema that includes the person’s physical body and this technological extension. And the re-embodiment relation concerns the body image, or conscious presence the user has in the game as the character. So long as the user plays, the way he perceives what is happening in the game is as if it were happening to him. And what the character does in the game is interpreted as what the user is doing. Virtual re-embodiment as described by Besmer is then unique enough to be categorically distinct from the embodiment relation.