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Game Past/Future:
Narrative and Phenomenological Time in
First-Person-Shooters

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I propose a synthesis of Merleau-Ponty's and Ricoeur's temporal models to describe how first-person-shooters suggest human time. Merleau-Ponty's model of phenomenological time identifies the movement generated by perception itself. Ricour's model of narrative time seeks to bridge individual and cosmological time. Their synthesis suggests how human time is experienced in some video games as the progressive narrowing down of the possibilities embodied in a new game space, or the movement of what Merleau-Ponty calls the pre-reflective to the reflective, and Ricour calls mimemis$_1$ to mimesis$_3$. It further accounts for how perceptions of time experienced in games extend beyond game play itself.

General Terms

Performance, Design, Human Factors, Theory.

Keywords

Phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, First-Person-Shooters, Video Games.

1. INTRODUCTION

In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, proposes a model of time in which reflective thought is indebted to pre-reflective experience. The pre-reflective represents the perceptual moment when the subject first "evaluates the potentialities of the whole environment and is the ground of any explicit and voluntary acts of intentionality while its own character remains 'concealed behind the objective world which it helps to build up.'"[1] In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur proposes a differing model of time, one that privileges narrative rather than perception. According to Ricoeur, narrative time arcs through three levels of mimesis, connecting an awareness of the range of potential actions inherent in a narrative situation through the plotting and commitment to a specific action to the resultant refiguration of the reader's world. Merleau-Ponty's model speaks to perception and immediacy, but ultimately may fail to extend beyond the subject's phenomenological experience. Ricoeur's model embraces a larger sense of the world, but is language based and limited by its dependence on narrative tropes and

expectations. In this paper, I will argue that taken together, they suggest a model for how we might consider the player's awareness of time in first-person-shooters, and how this might extend beyond the game itself.

Any discussion of temporality begins with the problem that has concerned philosophers since Augustine. How does the minuscule span of human life count against the movement of the universe? Or, turned another way, how do humans whose life is circumscribed by their mortality perceive cosmological time? On one hand, while phenomenological time tracks the progression of personal perception, it rejects the distance, the necessary abstraction, to dwell on the larger movements of history. On the other, while cosmological time presents the articulation of science, it models time as a sequence of discrete "nows" without the width to contain past or future. Augustine famously tried to address this disassociation by imagining a distention/protention, a thickening of time, so that we could hold simultaneously the past, present and the future.

Merleau-Ponty rejects Augustine's intellectual or psychological reading of time for the same reason that he rejects the idea of scientifically based "nows", because they reinforce the very dualism that he challenges. In its place, he proposes a transitional synthesis, a moving sense of the present that constantly redefines a past and a future, along with an ongoing, every changing relationship to them. To Merleau-Ponty, subjectivity itself emerges from this temporal progression. The pre-reflective contains an abundance of possibilities, which the subject progressively organizes, creating an increasingly narrow field of presence, as the subject's intentionality gains focus.

Merleau-Ponty sees the pre-reflective as an engagement with the other. The subject seeks, but always fails, to overcome the otherness of the perceived other. Put another way, "Our new present [arises] as soon as the otherness, which the previous present failed to encompass, [becomes] obtrusive." [2] The evolution of perception itself defines phenomenological time, but by its very nature undercuts the standpoint necessary to regard cosmological time.

Ricoeur, on the other hand, accepts the paradox of time, arguing not for a reconciliation of its two competing perspectives, but for a third, narrated time, which acknowledges the interplay between

them. He focuses on a scale of cosmological time that speaks to the history of generations, the sense of a past that leaves a trace on our lives and helps shape us. Narrative connects us to this cosmological time through our identification with characters whose immediate, phenomenological perceptions we can enter, while at the same time whose life passes on a scale much more compressed than ours does; hence, making concrete for us a longer perspective on time.

2. MERLEAU-PONTY'S TEMPORALITY APPLIED TO *HALF LIFE 2*

In arguing that the world is too dependent on the abstractions of science, Merleau-Ponty asks that the subject recapture the original pre-reflective experience that underlies knowledge. In doing so, the subject will become aware of being-in-the-world, the sense of embodied presence, in which she initially engaged her perception, recognizing the range of possibilities that it originally offered her. This recognition will open the subject's sense of what Merleau-Ponty calls the plenum, the richness, of the world.

I claim that during an aporia, the game studies' term for the time during which the player is blocked by an obstacle, the player initially engages something akin to this pre-reflective experience. Subsequently, assuming her continuing difficulty in solving the aporia, she progressively returns to the pre-reflective as a source of creative engagement, as she probes, seeking her way forward.

In a previous paper, I have argued that Merleau-Ponty's distinction between the pre-reflective and the reflective provides a way to account for the forward drive in computer games. Let's consider an example from an aporia taken from the game *Half Life 2* in which we must pilot an airboat through a passageway blocked by a line of pilings, while under the fire from two personnel carriers. We round a bend on the airboat …

Figure 1

pass an overturned tug, and see . . .

Figure 2

. . . this pre-reflective world.

Even if this moment of pre-reflective perception were not immediately displaced by the lapse of Merleau-Ponty's temporality, it would be disturbed by the fact that as soon as we round the bend, we are fired upon by the personnel carriers. In addition to the short temporal duration of pre-reflective perception, well-crafted games play against our ability to savor these moments by imposing immediate threats to our lives. The gunshots instantly terminate our meditation; causing us to choose among the many intentionalities the pre-reflective potentially suggests, picking those that most protect our life.
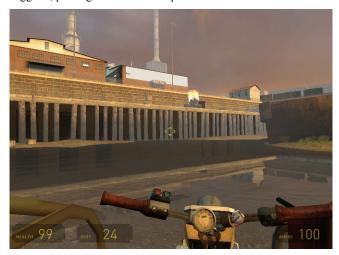

Figure 3

Once we have destroyed the immediate threat of the personnel carriers, we study the world in front of us. Experiencing it initially at the pre-reflective level, we are drawn to the space under the pier, guarded by the pilings. In choosing this as the intentionality we wish to pursue, we move to a more reflective mode; one more conceptually based as we calculate the space between the pilings. Unfortunately, when we get there, we discover the airboat will not fit (figure 4).

Figure 4

Now that we realize our perception was wrong and our initial intentionality has failed, we seek to regain a pre-reflective mode to engage other possibilities for action. In frustration, we return back to the position we originally occupied, (figure 3) regarding the pilings from a distance, looking for another clue. However, although we can return to the position of figure 3, we cannot recapture its original innocence; it no longer contains the same level of fully pre-reflective creative possibilities. That is, we can see the pilings as we once did, but we cannot remake our subjectivity to perceive them without the sedimented structure that we now carry from having failed to penetrate them.

Of course, if our return to the position of figure 3 lacked all creative possibilities, that is, if it were not possible to return to some aspect of the pre-reflective, however limited, the situation would have become entirely sedimented and we would never escape the aporia. The process is iterative, a constant drawing of intentionalities out of the pre-reflective, testing them and then, if they fail, returning back for new impulses. The pre-reflective becomes more limited on each return because the testing reduces the possibilities it contains – but the progressive limitations serve to further focus our subsequence reflective actions.

3. RICOEUR'S THREE-FOLD MIMESIS APPLIED TO *HALF LIFE 2*

Ricoeur uses his three versions of mimesis to articulate narrative time. The first, $mimesis_1$, refers broadly to the world that precedes the text and provides raw material for the writer, as Ricoeur puts it "the composition of the plot is grounded in a pre-understanding of the world of action." [3] This may contain fragments of imaginary content in the writer's imagination, as well as the narrative tropes that emerge from the broader culture. $Mimesis_2$ is the text itself, the act of organizing the potential inherent in $mimesis_1$ into the time of the story, an act that Ricoeur calls emplotment. Emplotment is action, whether the writer's in determining the plotting or, I will argue, the game player in engaging the avatar. This action realizes the options suggested, but not yet committed to, in $mimesis_1$. Finally $mimesis_3$ represents the refiguration or transformation in the reader as a result of experiencing this emplotment. This refiguration "marks the intersection of the text and the world of the hearer or reader" [4]

Looking at the *Half Life 2* aporia through the model of Riceour's triple mimesis, we find that $mimesis_1$ is embodied in the totality of the screenshot, figure 3. It includes the pilings, the boat, the personnel carrier on top of the dock, all the implied actions that a player can make and the responses that might counter her advance.

Now this immediately suggests a potential problem with this model. We would suppose $mimesis_1$ to be the engagement with the unformed world. Yet what we are calling $mimesis_1$, the screenshot in figure 3, is carefully pre-designed. For instance, without even initially knowing why, we are drawn into the depth of the screenshot, first by the overall sense of glow, then the symmetry of the sky's reflection in the water, and the slightly off-center vanishing point of converging lines. Looking more closely, we note how carefully these perceptions are prepared. The glow is heightened by the darkening of the foreground, which creates a mask that serves to frame and contrast with the light. The reflections divide the horizontal axis of the frame in half. And finally the strong convergence of the vanishing point is heightened by the angle of the ramp on the left side of the screen and the corresponding line of the wall on the right side. All these effects are further intensified by the fact that the depth algorithm of the game program has not yet textured the boat or the receding dock in the center of the screen, so that we do not see them as details, but as undifferentiated light forms.

But paradoxically this pre-designed frame illustrates the central cultural component that Ricoeur models in $mimesis_1$. He does not ask for innocence. Rather he defines $mimesis_1$ as a "semantics of action", or, as he puts it, "to understand a story is to understand both the language of 'doing something' and the cultural tradition from which proceeds the typology of plots" [5].

If $mimesis_1$ proposes the pre-conditions for action, $mimesis_2$ is the structuring of events in a particular order to represent a specific form of action or emplotment, or to jump back to Merleau-Ponty's terminology, an intentionality. In a literary work, the prior options suggested by $mimesis_1$ are not so much given, but inferred by the reader from her interpretation of $mimesis_2$. In computer games, however, the player is presented with $mimesis_1$ as a visual text that suggests various potential for action. The player constructs $mimesis_2$ by virtue of her choice. She identifies a path and generates a form of emplotment by moving through the visual environment. The emplotment leaves a trace.

But what kind of trace is left and what changes when a player fails to solve the aporia?

As we noted above, failing to pilot the airboat through the pilings, to find what would be $minesis_3$, the player returns back to figure 3. Nothing has changed in the world in front of her. There is no discernable trace. Yet something is different in terms of the emplotment. Although she may physically return to figure 3 from which she started, she cannot go back to the beginning of the story. The playing out of $mimesis_2$, however incomplete, has marked the player's experience.

4. SYNTHESIS OF MERLEAU-PONTY'S AND RICOEUR'S APPROACH TO TIME

This brings us back to Merleau-Ponty's pre-reflective. In a creative experience, we tend to oscillate between the pre-reflective and the reflective as we test and discard certain

intentionalities. The original pre-reflective, standing back from the pilings, lead us to develop an intentionality that suggested we could drive our airboat between them. This intentionality failed, and we were forced to re-establish a new outside position and re-grasp the pre-reflective to give ourselves the opportunity to chose other intentionalities. Yet the new pre-reflective is limited because it carries with it our failure with the pilings. Our new pre-reflective perception is occluded, part of the visual field is blocked as a result of our experience. This limitation becomes a form of a trace. We cannot engage mimesis$_1$ with the same openness as could when we first started.

Game theorist Jesper Juul sees these failures, and the subsequent need to adjust, as fundamental to the pleasure of game play. As he puts it, "failure is central to player enjoyment of games." [6] Out of failure, we learn. Since we cannot directly penetrate the pilings, we seek other creative situations until we find a possible portal through a storage container. Except that it is sealed.

Figure 5

However, our emplotment by now has run a long course, the traces have built up and our pre-reflective possibilities are so limited that by process of elimination we realize that the container must be the only way through. These limitations cause us to persist until we find a way to blow the container's door off.

Ricoeur uses the term "fusion of horizons" to describe mimesis$_3$, the reader's experience of the text opening up to the world. It is also the moment where the intimate temporality of our character's life, engaged through narrative identification, is connected to the larger cosmology of world time, particularly as it concerns the passing of generations. Mimesis$_3$ is the achievement of narrative time, the linking of these perspectives.

At the moment of finding the solution to the aporia, we experience something akin to mimesis$_3$. It does not literally transform the text or take us out of the text to the larger world. But time is refigured; it is given a presence for us. The range of opportunities implicit in mimesis$_1$ and the transformation of those opportunities into the emplotment of mimesis$_2$ lead to a perception of the shape of time in mimesis$_3$.

Or to turn it back into Merleau-Ponty's terms. The reflective is realized in the solution of the aporia, but it never entirely displaces the pre-reflective. That is, the way we initially perceived the aporia suggests certain perspectives that remain below the

level of our consciousness, but keep re-asserting themselves. This ambiguity or tension is most apparent at the moment of resolution because the player both savors the solution, but also cannot dismiss the other intentionalities implicit in the pre-reflective that almost worked, but ultimately had to be discarded.

Either way, this moment functions as a metaphor, embodying both the beginning and end of the aporia; as such, it becomes a meditation on the passing of time. But unlike the passing of narrative time which the reader perceives through the conflict of represented human interaction, this metaphor, while still using some of the strategies of narrative, evokes the passing of perceptual time. It demonstrates how intentionalities emerge out of the possibilities embedded within pre-reflective or mimetic$_1$ perceptions. We sense this emergence because the pre-reflective or mimesis$_1$ is recapitulated, although with diminished presence, a number of times before the problem is solved. Each recapitulation serves to foreground what Merleau-Ponty calls the "network of intentionalities" – the choice that time presents.

5. CONCLUSION
Merleau-Ponty's model of phenomenological time identifies the movement generated by perception itself. It grounds abstract reflective perception in the immediacy of non-sedimented, creative situations. But, although he argues otherwise, Merleau-Ponty tends to bracket out cosmological time in favor of the individual being-in-the-world.

Ricoeur's model of narrative time seeks to bridge individual and cosmological time. He joins the sense of direct personal experience that comes through the reader's narrative identification with the passing of generations. Yet Ricoeur's model is tied to the specifics of language-based narrative and does not speak to the subject's perception of being in a larger flux of experience.

Taken together in the context of video games, however, these two philosophical perspectives suggest a way to understand how first-person-shooters generate an awareness of time that goes beyond the game world itself. Using narrative techniques, but without depending on the specificity of narrative engagements, first-person-shooters may give us a way to think of human time as the playing out of the multitude of possibilities embodied in the pre-reflective or mimetic$_1$ plenum of new game spaces.

6. REFERENCES
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