Postphenomenological Performance in Interactive Narrative

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the performance of bodies through a postphenomenological framework developed by Don Ihde. Through his theory, I will argue how performance is central to the stories of two recent interactive artworks: Dennis Del Favero’s Scenario (2011) and Blast Theory’s A Machine to See With (2010). Both artworks are distinct interactive narratives that utilize the human body in different ways. In each experience, it is essential for the user’s body to perform with a technology in order to move the story through a sequence of events. In doing so the user as a performing body co-authors the story by interfacing with a technology in a specific way. My readings of the artworks are based on interviews that I have conducted with each of the artists. I pair these accounts with Ihdeian analysis to explain how different types of technologies and different uses of a technology break down into different human-technology relationships. I use these relationships to show how the story in each artwork is mobilized through the body of the participant as a postphenomenological performance.

KEYWORDS

Art, Body, Don Ihde, Interactive, Phenomenology, Postphenomenology

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the extensions of the human body in interactive artwork environments, which is considered through the postphenomenological framework of Don Ihde’s philosophy of technology. Through this framework this paper builds upon Ihde’s postphenomenology to consider how narrative is formed in interactive spaces through the gestures and behaviours of bodily movement. This work discusses how the body co-creates meaningful experiences by interfacing with a technology and how such experientially reveals what a body is. This paper analyses Dennis Del Favero’s Scenario (2011), a digital interactive and immersive narrative artwork that uses the body to structure and co-create a fictional experience. Within this work a user’s body becomes virtually wired into the immersive world through the performance of their movement. Emphasis within this cinematic experience is thus shifted from the screen to the moving body that is sensed by the technological architecture of the space, revealing a specific relationship between the narrative, body and space of the installation. Using and building upon Ihde’s framework this paper also incorporates original interview material with Del Favero to consider how a body, within an interactive space, becomes a postphenomenological performance.
Postphenomenology

Don Ihde’s postphenomenology considers the relationship between bodies and technologies. This is an area of research that can be traced back as early as 1877, when Ernst Kapp’s *Grundlinien Einer Philosophie Der Tecknik (Philosophy of Technology)* (Kapp, 1877) was published. Within that work, Kapp traces the evolution of tools, which, as he argues, developed from the appearance and functionality of the human body. As Kapp states, humans have limited capacities in terms of vision, muscular strength or storable information, and consequentially overcame such limitations through tools, which should be considered as replacements to human organs, rather than an extension or supplement (Brey, 2000). As Kapp argues, tools were intended to replace human organs, and as such, were designed on human organ functionality.

‘The bent finger becomes a hook, the hollow of the hand a bowl,’ (Mitcham, 1994, p. 24) while various technologies from swords, oars, rakes or spades evoke the positions of human arms, hands and fingers (Mitcham, 1994, p. 24). As Pasi Väliaho writes, this is what Kapp refers to as organ projections, ‘in which our corporeal apparatus, the inside, becomes exteriorized in technical objects’ (Väliaho, 2010, p. 80). Following Kapp, Väliaho explains how ‘the eye [is] an organ modulated through its projection in the camera obscura, whereas the nervous system is recreated through its projection in the electro-magnetic telegraph’ (Väliaho, 2010, p. 80). These technological projections of the body are established from ‘the Greek word *organon*, which means both a part of the body and a tool’ (Väliaho, 2010, p. 80)

Many have closely followed this line of inquiry; Peter Sloterdijk has argued that, ‘humans have already been strongly shaped by technology’ (Koops et al., 2013, p. 97), while Marshall McLuhan has famously declared in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, that, ‘[a]ny invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies, and such extension also demands new ratios or new equilibriums among the other organs and extensions of the body’ (McLuhan, 1964, p. 49). This is something that Ihde takes up, as he considers the extensions, limits and engagements the human body experiences with and through technological devices.

As Ihde observes, both tools and bodies are everywhere, pervasive across our lifeworld. Throughout Ihde’s body of work (that includes twenty-two books published between 1973-2016) the concept of the human body and its relationship with technology, has remained the focal point of the author’s attention. Within his writings, Ihde considers how different technologies change, adapt, correct, limit and extend (in a McLuhanesque way) the functionality and ontology of human experience.

From eyeglasses that correct and extend human vision to bicycles and automobiles that change our bodily sense of speed through transportation, Ihde deliberates upon how a technological apparatus restructures the corporeality and subjectivity of a human user in a postphenomenological way. Ihde’s postphenomenology is inspired by the phenomenological philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, each of which posit a number of phenomenological ideas about the human body and how its engagement with tools shape and modify experience. Within this paper, I adopt Ihde’s philosophy to consider how a body and technology interface with one another to construct an interactive, narrative experience. I then build upon these ideas, with my own original contribution of using Ihde’s hypothesis to consider how elements of story are formed between a user’s body and a technological environment, transcending an audience spectator to a postphenomenological performer.

This paper discusses an interactive art installation through an interview I have conducted with the artist, while utilising three of Ihde’s main postphenomenological ideas. First I consider Ihde’s concept of how a technology simultaneously extends and limits the corporeal body of the user. Second, I incorporate Ihde’s specific human-technology relationships (which I describe below) as a way to
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