

Gaming Mind, Gaming Body: The Mind/Body Split For a New Era

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the phenomenologically inspired works of Drew Leder and Randy Martin, this paper examines the ways in which playing a First-Person Shooter first creates a secondary body for the player and then, because of the first-person perspective, proceeds to erase that body from the player's consciousness. The paper explores the notion of and the ways in which First-Person Shooters complicate our conception of embodiment. Offering an ethnographically-influenced semiotic analysis of playing a FPS, the paper begins by declaring that we are typically not aware of our bodies and that playing a FPS gives us another body on which to concentrate causing an erasure of the physical body. It is then asserted that the virtual body is also rendered invisible due to the perspective and speed of the game resulting in a double erasure of the body leaving behind only the mind.

Keywords

first-person shooter, embodiment, disembodiment, phenomenology

At noon, on Saturday November 1, 2003, on the campus of Indiana University, over eighty people gathered together in a residence hall dining room for the IU LAN War. They brought computers, pillows, blankets and various other items with them. They were there to play videogames, but not just any videogames – First-Person Shooters (FPS) such as *Counter-Strike*, *Desert Combat*, or *Unreal Tournament*. The majority of them would not leave until noon the next day and many did not even sleep the entire time they were there. Instead they stayed awake, staring at a computer monitor, ignoring the needs of their body so they could play videogames. In a situation such as this, the role of the body is more complex than it might first appear. When we play these games for such extended periods of time, we ignore our physical bodies and concentrate on what happens to our virtual bodies inside the game world. While playing a FPS, where is the body located? Is it sitting in a chair in front of the monitor, in the game running and shooting, in both locations or in neither?

The ambiguity that results from using the body we possess on a day-to-day basis to control the body within the game itself is in many ways unique to the situation of playing a FPS because we forget about our physical bodies while playing these games. However, we also forget about the virtual bodies which creates a compelling opportunity to explore the ways in

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which our mind perceives our own embodiment. Moreover, an analysis of the way in which the technology of the computer enables and reinforces the ways in which society works to hide the body reveals the manner in which the Cartesian mind/body split is reinforced. Therefore, this paper explores the notion that although First-Person Shooters are, in some ways, presented as a simulation of the body or as a supplement/replacement for the body, they have the effect of not only reinforcing the body's affinity to hide itself but also of obscuring the physical body's role in society.

In relationship to the body, it is important to emphasize the fact that unlike God games, Hex-based military games or even many classic arcade games such as *Pac-Man* or *Dig Dug*, within the world of a First-Person Shooter, the player has complete freedom of movement. For all intents and purposes, when the game is going well, a FPS player has two bodies, one inside the game and one outside. The player is able to move in any direction, can turn, weave, walk in one direction while looking in another, as well as countless other possibilities. Because these movements attempt to replicate those of an able-bodied person, once a player has mastered the control system, it is easy to forget that they are not actually running, jumping or shooting but are just sitting in front of a computer monitor or television. The physical body disappears and, at least while playing the game, the body within the game is of much greater concern since it is the body most in use.

In *The Absent Body*, as the title suggests, Drew Leder discusses the way in which the body is absent in our lives. He writes that although we perceive the world through our bodies, eyes, ears, and hands, "this bodily presence is of a highly paradoxical nature." [1] While our bodies are "the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives," they are essentially "characterized through absence. That is, one's own body is rarely the thematic object of experience." [1] *The Absent Body*, represents his attempt, "to answer the question of why the body, as a ground of experience, ...tends to recede from direct experience." [1]

Leder posits that part of the way in which the body works is through concealment. He discusses how it is impossible to see our eyes because we see from our eyes and that even if we try use one hand to feel the other, we cannot "touch it touching." [1] He states that "insofar as I perceive through an organ, it necessarily recedes from the perceptual field it discloses." [1] Thus for Leder, the body's absence is a result of its very nature.

Leder writes, "I may be engaged in a fierce sport, muscles flexed and responsive to the slightest movements of my opponent. Yet it is precisely upon this opponent, this game, that my attention dwells, not on my own embodiment." [1] I find this lack of attention on my own body evident when I play a FPS because while playing my mind is certainly not concentrating on my physical body. I may be sitting in a chair, but most of the time I am not conscious of that sitting, nor am I aware of what my legs or feet are doing. Because most FPS games are very fast paced, if you want to be successful in a game, there is no time to concentrate on your actual body. Thus, the body's ability to recede from attention is vital. If the body becomes a distraction, the player will lose.

In this, FPS games seem to offer a form of entertainment where players' (virtual) bodies become of utmost importance. Contrary to some, such as Deborah Lupton in her essay "The Embodies Computer/User," where she argues, "The dream of cyberculture is to leave the 'meat' behind...", the entire point of First-Person Shooters seems to be the body. [2] The games are embodiment writ large in that within the game players are engaged in physical, aggressive, hyper-masculine conflicts. They are able to inhabit bigger better bodies and do things they could never do in the physical world. Thus, rather than an attempt to leave the "meat" behind, the dream of First-Person Shooters can be seen as an attempt to gain a better body, to gain more meat.

Like most dreams, though, the reality of FPS games is often very different. The reality of playing a FPS is that once in the heat of the game, all is forgotten except the action. Thus, not only does the intensity of the action within the game render the physical body of a FPS player "invisible", but so too is the ideal body within the game so that the player can concentrate more fully on the actions of that body. That both the physical body and the virtual body can so easily be ignored while playing a game seems to indicate that rather than something tied directly and essentially to any physical biology, masculinity is a set of behaviors and a mentality that one can act out. In the case of a FPS such as *Unreal Tournament* or even more tactical FPS games like *Counter-Strike*, the players are using the virtual body within the games to act in ways that would be difficult, if not impossible, to do with their physical bodies. While playing the game, both the physical body as well as the virtual body become backgrounded to the (virtual) physicality of the action itself. In doing so, players are leaving behind the body, but taking the "meat."

Therefore, while playing a FPS game, not only is the player's attention not dwelling on one's physical embodiment, but there is also another form of disembodiment occurring. While playing a FPS, the player looks through the eyes of a virtual character, seeing what the character sees. The player does not see the player because, for all intents and purposes, while playing a FPS, the player *is* the character. For experienced players, while the physical body is not the thematic object of experience, neither is the virtual body. Thus, it seems that in a FPS, not only is a player not aware of one's embodiment, they are similarly unaware of their disembodiment.

Leder writes, "It is via my sensorimotor powers that I encounter a world charged with meaning and organized into significant gestalts. Within this perceptual world the body can itself appear as but another object to be perceived and scientifically described." [1] By this he means that if we were to take the time to consider how we move our legs while walking, we would most look at them as if we were looking at the legs of another person. After all, who has not marveled at the way our own muscles move? As it pertains to videogames, while the physical body *can* appear as another object to be perceived and scientifically described, the virtual body actually *is* an object which was scientifically described by computer programmers and called into being by that description. Despite this, however,

while playing the game this body is not perceived as another object but as an extension of the physical body.

This raises the issue, while playing a FPS, which body is the true “body-as-experiencer?” [1] While listening to the general chatter back and forth between the players at the LAN party, I often heard things like “I got him!” “He’s over here.” “I went down there and shot him.” “I ran out of ammo.” “I didn’t have a good gun.” Never did I hear something like, “My character was over there.” “My avatar was out of ammo.” Or even “Your character shot my character.” In this way, however much gamers talk about in-game actions, there is rarely any discussion of the virtual body that actually performed those actions. In this instance, the virtual body is absent because it has become overshadowed by its actions. Even more absent from perception than the virtual body is the physical body, the body that pushed the keys on the keyboard, that moved the mouse, and that allowed the images on the screen to be seen.

Shedding light on the subject, Leder states that the *Korper* is the physical body while the *Leib* is the living or lived body. [1] As part of his project to critique Cartesianism, Leder is careful not to overemphasize the *Leib-Korper* distinction lest it distract from his search for, “a concept of embodiment that avoids dualistic presumptions.” [1] While this may be a good tactic to employ in analysis of the physical world, it seems that when dealing with First-Person Shooters, disregarding the distinction between the physical body and the lived body would be too hasty a decision. In this instance it may be possible to utilize this dualism to great advantage. Indeed, Leder writes that an opposition between the *Leib* and *Korper* can arise, “when we identify the lived body solely with the first-person perspective, the body lived-from-within, as opposed to the “object body” seen from without.” [1]

In the attempt to deconstruct this opposition between the *Leib* and *Korper* he writes, “To be a lived body is always also to be a physical body with bones and tendons, nerves and sinews, all of which can be scientifically characterized. These are not two different bodies. *Korper* is itself an aspect of *Leib*, one manner in which the lived body shows itself.” [1] However, the act of playing a FPS does indeed create two different bodies: one physical and the other virtual. While playing the game the person is not living within their own body, but within the virtual body. It seems that while playing a First-Person Shooter, the *Leib* is the body within the FPS and the *Korper* is the one sitting in the chair in front of the computer. In this way, there is a distinct separation between where the body is lived and where the body exists. Thus not only is there a mind body split, there is a split between the different aspects of the body.

While it may seem as if playing a game such as this is simply inserting the body into a virtual world, it has been shown that it does not do this at all. It creates a second body, which it then serves to render invisible. In this way, it not only mirrors the invisibility of the physical body but also serves as a naturalization of that invisibility.

In *Performance as Political Act*, Randy Martin charts the history of the body in Western society. Discussing the body's social practice and its place in politics, Martin writes that Foucault, “provides the historical evidence for the body as an object of consciousness,” and demonstrates, “that consciousness has itself been an object of domination in the modern world. The individual body is a social construction with a social end, to provide the discipline necessary to turn the body into a laboring machine.” [3] Thus, for Martin, the social body is struggling against repression and has, as a result of successive attacks, disappeared from contemporary culture. [3]

Martin argues:

The mind-body split of the twentieth century is quite a different beast from that of the nineteenth. It demands more of the body and commands less.... The fixation behind a computer terminal does not so much consume the body in its entirety as take a part, say the hands, for the whole. By doing so, the hands must do more and more while the rest of the body does less, the fingers moving faster than the greater mass ever could. [3]

In this Martin could very well be describing what it is like to play a First-Person Shooter! It seems incredibly ironic that we work one part of our bodies so hard in order to move another body on screen. To make the irony deeper, the body in the game we are working so hard to move is not even seen – the only thing one can see is the *results* of moving!

Of course, most FPS games are played on computers, meaning that the very machines at which many work are also the devices at which they play. In this way, work and play can take the same physical situation: sitting in front of a computer moving hands and fingers. As a graduate student, this similarity between work and play is especially disturbing. While I certainly teach and read, what makes up a great deal of my work? Sitting in front of the computer typing at the keyboard on a paper. What occupies a large percentage of my play? Sitting in front of that same computer, typing away at a game. Thus I and many people who spend their time in similar fashion are doubly involved in this process of rendering the body invisible, for it is both in work *and* play that we render our bodies invisible. Certainly the work of Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer in “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” would argue the significance of work and recreation taking such similar forms.

Martin states that the change from physical labor to labor such as sitting in front of a keyboard all day has “rendered the body invisible.” [3] Computer games have moved beyond this formulation so that now even physical leisure has been transformed into a virtual leisure that takes place in front of a keyboard. Therefore, just as working in front of a computer renders the body invisible, so too does playing in front of one. However, while other types of games, such as fighting or sports games at least replace the physical body with a computerized one, FPS games are doubly guilty of this erasure because the first person perspective serves to obscure even the virtual body. In this way, it seems that playing a First-Person Shooter is a way for society to further render the body invisible and immobile. Why

should one make use of the physical body when a virtual body is so much easier to manipulate, does not feel pain, and is never tired? Thus the act of playing a First-Person Shooter is yet another way of erasing the physical body from social life.

While both Leder and Martin write that modern Western society is typified by a certain “disembodied” style of life, Martin locates that disembodiment in society, while Leder argues there is a biological basis for that invisibility and it is, “only because the body has intrinsic tendencies toward self-concealment ... [that] such tendencies [could] be exaggerated by linguistic and technological extensions.” [1] Because playing First-Person Shooters allows players to possess a type of body that society deems the ultimate in masculinity, in some ways, playing a First-Person Shooter can be seen as an attempt to gain a virtual form of embodiment. As Leder points out, however, this attempt is less than successful however due to the very nature of the physical body and, as Martin shows, is also unsuccessful due to societal structures. This makes the Cartesian mind/body split literal in that we are mentally engaged in playing and even though we have two bodies, one physical, one virtual, they are nowhere to be found.

To return to the opening image, that of the LAN party, it is important to note, at least for the eighty or more gamers at the IU LAN War, that while their physical body may not be important, the physical presence of others surely must be. If that were not the case, then why would we be there and not at home playing on the Internet? Thus it seems that one area for further research would be to study the reasons why being able to connect out teammates and opponents to physical bodies is so important when it seems just as important to disconnect from our own. Both Martin and Leder propose ways in which the invisibility of the body can be altered or alleviated. However, it seems that the ability to make our bodies disappear is at least one of the inherent attractions of First-Person Shooters. Therefore, as new forms of entertainment are developed, the effects of the mind/body split must continually be re-evaluated.

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