

Conditions of Mediation

Phenomenological Perspectives on Media

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Interactive World Disclosure (OR, AN Interface Is Not A Hammer)

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“An emotional suckerpunch in 256 colours and a midi soundtrack.”¹

Players of *Passage*, Jason Rohrer’s art game from 2007, report a similar experience—a moment of discovery that the game is actually a *memento mori* device. *Wired Magazine*’s Clive Thompson describes it eloquently:

When I first launched the game, I was struck by the weird size of the play screen: a thin, horizontal strip only a few inches high. The graphics are old-school, low-rez pixels of the sort you’d see in an early ’80s videogame. Your character is a little blond, blue-eyed man. You have five minutes to play.

As I started moving around, I quickly realized that while you can only see a small strip of the game world at a time, it contains a maze that stretches far off to the east and south. This makes exploration tantalizing but also frustrating, because you can’t figure out what direction to go in.

About 30 seconds into the play, I encountered a little pixelized woman, and when I touched her, a heart bloomed around us—and suddenly we moved as one. Marriage! It was charming, but I soon found that it limited my movement, because there were parts of the maze that only a single person could fit through.

Then things got weird. About three minutes into the game, I realized with a shock that my character had changed appearance. My hair had darkened, and—hey, was I getting *bald*? My ‘wife’, too, looked older, her hair whitened.

We kept on exploring eastward and southward; the lovely but impressionistically vague backgrounds changed color, shifting like Picasso-style fall leaves. But pretty soon it was obvious that my avatar was getting really, really super-old. Then abruptly, my wife died: A little tombstone blipped in her place. I walked on alone for another 30 seconds, then, just as suddenly, I died, too—another little gray tombstone.

Which is when I realized, with a stab of pain, just what *Passage* is:

It's a game about life.²

Looking at the numerous online discussions dedicated to the game, it becomes clear that Thompson's pain was shared by many other players who found *Passage*'s spartan aesthetics (see Figure 11.1) and minimalistic game mechanism to be both puzzling and revelatory. But why? How does the interactive experience provided by the game evoke such strong (dare I say existential?) responses? What is it in *Passage*'s gameplay, mechanism, or structure that gives rise to such self-professed moments of discovery? In what follows I begin to offer an answer by unpacking the interactive experience evoked by *Passage* and giving it a phenomenological explanation. My inquiry builds primarily on Heidegger's analysis of technics in *Being and time*, combined with more recent work in human-computer interaction (HCI). Generalizing from the game to interactive new media as a whole, I will suggest that the responses players have to *Passage* are indicative of the way interactive new media position users in the complex relational contexture Heidegger calls "world." In short, digital interactivity affects, inflects, and refracts our perception of the world, providing us with ways to reveal, disclose, and give meaning to certain aspects of reality that may otherwise remain concealed in our everyday activities. In this sense, one may argue, digital interactivity embodies both the "danger" and the "saving power" Heidegger would later identify with modern technology as a whole.³

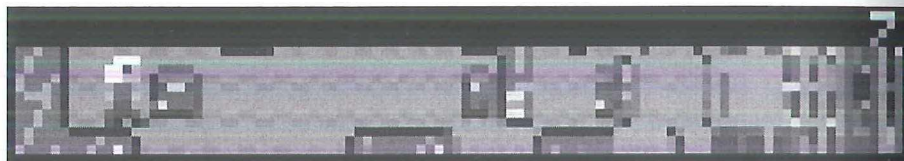


Figure 11.1: Screen capture of *Passage*.

Source: <http://hcsoftware.sourceforge.net/passage>

TOWARDNESS

Next time around, I was determined to reach the end of the passage; I grabbed my wife and marched straight forward to death...not much to say there. But the third time I decided to

ditch the girl and try to reach the bottom of the maze, and it really did surprise me when I saw all the flowers and treasure chests hidden below.⁴

There is something about new media's "responsive aesthetics," as VR pioneer Myron Krueger (2003) puts it, that invites us to act. A flashing cursor, a dropdown menu, a glimmering touchscreen—each presents us with an opportunity to engage with digital artifacts by manipulating onscreen objects, reeling us into the virtual environments they unfold. Digital games, in particular, enthrall players with a continuous series of prompts and feedback, obstacles and rewards, tunneling them, so to speak, toward particular predefined goals.⁵ In the parlance of HCI, the forward thrust that characterizes such interactive structures is often understood as an instance of "flow," referring to psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's writing on what he calls "optimal experience." And as attested by the comment that opens this section, users expect and seek it whenever they engage with interactive digital artifacts.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990, p. 71) defines flow as

a sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant, or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted.

The disappearance of self-consciousness, Csikszentmihalyi notes, renders the person fully immersed in the activity, producing a sense of inner order, control and, ultimately, intense enjoyment. Immersion, in this sense, arises from successfully navigating the "flow channel"—the psychic space between boredom and anxiety: if the challenge is too complex or difficult, requiring the person to stretch their skills beyond their capacity, the activity will produce anxiety. Inversely, if the challenges are overmatched by the person's skills they will result in boredom. But when the flow channel unfolds optimally, the activity becomes "autotelic"—an end to itself—which, in the context of digital interactivity, manifests a kind of activity-centered enclosure, a state of pleasurable absorption in the activity and nothing else. To borrow terminology from film studies, flow produces a kind of *inward diegetic absorption*: awareness that is fixed on the matrix of relations that underlie onscreen entities, and is oriented toward achieving goals in the most efficient manner.⁶

The way flow unfolds as the experience of felt relationality coiled around a vector of action is strikingly similar to the way Heidegger describes the experience of technically mediated action. In the famed tool analysis of *Being and time*, Heidegger explains that in the thrust of activity the tool we are using withdraws from consciousness ("into a dark subterranean reality," as Graham Harman (2002, p. 1) puts it), and our consciousness is left to concern the practical aspects of the activity: "That with which our everyday dealings proximally dwell is not the tools

themselves. On the contrary, that with which we concern ourselves primarily is the work—that which is to be produced at the time” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 99). In Heidegger’s example, when the cobbler uses a hammer to drive a nail into a shoe, the hammer, nail, and shoe dissolve into a fundamental thrust, a “towards-this” that encompasses the worker, the assemblage of tools and materials they are using, and the micro-activities or sub-tasks involved. The overall intention subsumes specific activities, and the more absorbed in our activity we are, the more the technical artifacts we use withdraw to form a “symbiosis of artifact and user within a human action” whose ideal is “total transparency” (Ihde, 1990, p. 73).

Heidegger points out that in this state of immersion we gain a felt, pre-reflexive, non-thematic awareness of the entire complex of materials, activities, and relations that are involved in the task at hand. We sense ourselves as beings-in-the-world:

Being-in-the-world ... amounts to a non-thematic circumspective absorption in references or assignments constitutive for the readiness-to-hand of a totality of equipment. Any concern is already as it is, because of some familiarity with the world. In this familiarity *Dasein* can lose itself in what it encounters within-the-world and be fascinated with it. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 107)

In “circumspective” or “concernful absorption” we sense our essential embeddedness in what Heidegger calls “world”: a complex system of involvements and significances, the relational contexture that makes intelligible every act and its corresponding mental state. In other words, we experience ourselves as relational beings that reflect and are reflected by the entities we engage, as *Da-Sein*, literally “being-there.” Immersion thus signifies a form of ontological openness—the felt impression of pure relationality that is only possible through action.

BREAKDOWN

When my wife died, I stopped moving, not really knowing what to do. It happened so suddenly. Do I move on? Where do I go from here? ⁷

The analysis of concernful absorption plays an important role in Heidegger’s attempt to render praxis “ontologically significant on its own terms” (Feenberg, 1999, p. 196), effectively substituting I-act for I-think as the fundamental unit of Being. Yet, despite its articulation as a form of ontological openness, concernful absorption is paradoxically yoked to a form of enclosure or captivation in the thrust of action. So while acting may give us a sense of the human embeddedness in a “referential totality,” it does not provide us with a closer understanding of that totality (Heidegger, 1962, p. 107). As long as the two are bound together, world disclosure remains a potentiality—something we may glimpse as always-already there, but cannot thematize or explicate. We may sense our *Dasein*-ness, but are unable to make sense of

it. The latter possibility, Heidegger argues, requires a break in the thrust of activity, a gap or lapse that would facilitate an abrupt transition from acting within a familiar environment, where the world is experienced non-thematically through a set of habituated procedures, into a more distanced, reflective approach to the world.

Heidegger explains that breaks in the flow of activity may be produced by three kinds of equipmental failure: *conspicuousness* (when a tool is unusable), *obtrusiveness* (when a tool cannot be used because of other tools), and *obstinacy* (when a tool stands in the way of other tasks). Although they represent different breakdown modalities, what they have in common is the way that they manifest the ontological duality of equipment as ready-to-hand *and* as present-at-hand, and, consequently, provide a space for the “worldly character of the world” to show up.

Regardless of whether tools are unusable, missing, or standing in the way of other tasks, in all three modes the flow of activity is disturbed in a manner that brings to the fore the larger contexts of action. The substitution of absorption with intentionality discloses the purpose of the activity (its “assignment” or “towards-this”) along with its interconnectedness to other activities, materials, and tools (its “references,” “significances,” and “involvements”). In Heidegger’s words:

When equipment cannot be used, this implies that the constitutive assignments of the “in-order-to” to a “towards-this” has been disturbed. The assignments themselves are not observed; they are rather “there” when we concernfully submit ourselves to them. But when *an assignment has been disturbed*—when something is unusable for some purpose—then the assignment becomes explicit. ... When an assignment to some particular “towards-this” has been thus circumspectively aroused, we catch sight of the “towards-this” itself, and along with it everything connected to the work—the whole “workshop”—as that wherein concern always dwells. The context of equipment is lit up, not as something never seen before, but as a totality constantly sighted beforehand in circumspection. With this totality, however, the world announces itself. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 105; emphasis in original)

The conclusion of Heidegger’s analysis is that while in the state of immersion we may glimpse our essential embeddedness in a contexture of relations, breakdowns in the flow of activity provide us with a space to consider that contexture more carefully (“the world announces itself”). And as we become *intentionally* aware of the larger framework within which we act, and which makes our actions meaningful to begin with, we gain a complementary understanding of ourselves, the world, and Being itself.⁸

At this point, one question that presents itself is how, if at all, would Heidegger’s analysis of tools and workshops, part of traditional craft, apply to digital experiences that are mediated by computational assemblages? Is the cobbler’s hammer equivalent to, and therefore replaceable by, a computer or an interface? This question is even more complicated in light of Heidegger’s later writings, especially “The question concerning technology,” where he associates modern technology with what he calls

“Enframing,” which, as a form of concealment, is the exact opposite of the world disclosing effects he attributes to tools in *Being and time*. Merely speculating that Heidegger may have changed his mind would he had lived to see the microcomputer revolution will not solve the conundrum because computer logic perfectly embodies the very same calculating, controlling, objectifying attitude Heidegger associated with Enframing. Setting aside Heidegger’s pessimism toward modernity,⁹ and the question of whether it is indeed only a God, IBM’s Big Blue or the next generation of cleantech that will save us, I think it fair to say that Heidegger’s disdain for modern technology is romantic at best, and needlessly deterministic at worst. As Don Ihde, Andrew Feenberg and others point out, Heidegger’s view effectively reifies *technologies* as *technology*, leaving no space for considering computation assemblages as singular entities, nor for shifting in and out of the positionality implied by Enframing.¹⁰ Technologies, in other words, are far too contingent, flexible, and malleable to be treated as merely a symptom of modernity’s inauthenticity. In contrast, I suggest that every interaction we have with others—humans or nonhumans—carries with it certain potentials for world disclosure. All of our technically mediated interactions may equally reveal or conceal some dimensions of reality, but this is contingent on the particular technology, the actual user and the concrete cultural context. If Dasein “never finds itself otherwise than in the things themselves, and in fact in those things that daily surround it,” as Heidegger (1982, p. 159) himself states, then we should not discriminate against any particular object, artifact, or Thing, as mundane, profane, or sublime as they may seem. Nonetheless, if we are to apply Heidegger’s analysis of craft to the interactive experiences we have with computational assemblages, it may be useful to differentiate between disruptions that breach the interactive platform from those that are contained by it.

COMPLICATED PLEASURES

Ok ... I’ve ‘played’ through it a few times and I still don’t see what the point is. Also I found the music and the graphical effect annoying. Not sure what I’m supposed to be feeling after going through that ... I feel confused ... that’s about it. Sorry.¹¹

Not all disruptions are equal, so to speak. Glitches or bugs, for instance, are quite different from missteps or misuses. While the former, much like a broken or absent hammer in Heidegger’s tool analysis, are symptoms of a failure (or logical “exception”) in computational procedures, the latter mark a breakdown in the “meaningfulness of the interface” (Krippendorff, 2006, p. 85), a trace of the “interface effect” in Alexander Galloway’s (2012) terms, or evidence of the undecidedness of computation, as David Berry puts it in his contribution to this book. In other words, if we are to distinguish *total* breakdowns in the computational assemblage from *relative* breakdowns, we should focus on the relation between the user’s expectations

and the actual performance of code. Whereas Krippendorff argues that disruptions should largely be avoided in order to maintain user friendliness, and Berry (2011) argues that disruptions are inherent to computational assemblages and are therefore unavoidable, I suggest we see them as part of a delicate balance between the familiar (habituated, expected) and the strange, what designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (2001, p. 63) call “complicated pleasures.” *Passage*’s ability to evoke complicated pleasures lies in the way the game creates a mismatch between affordances and interactive structure (the “in-order-to” and the “towards-this” in Heidegger’s language).¹² This mismatch results in productive ambiguity.

If immersive flow emerges as consequence of the interactor’s ability to navigate the virtual environment by selecting among fairly stable options that are ordered according to mostly tacit principles, ambiguity destabilizes these principles, compelling the interactor to construe their own meaning as to what exactly those options represent. In other words, ambiguity contrasts with the kind of narrowing down of the space for interpretation and appropriation that marks linear or tunneling interactive structures. Naturally, ambiguity may be frustrating, discomfiting, may strike the user as a form of randomness, or may end up in an aporia—each resulting in a different kind of pleasure (or in no pleasure at all).¹³ But ambiguity may also potentiate the same kind of world disclosure Heidegger associates with breakdowns, shifting the user’s comportment from inward diegetic immersion to a more reflexive disposition—from merely inhabiting the world to considering its “worldliness” (and in the process retrieving something like ethics, as per Nick Couldry in this volume, Part I, Second Dialogue).

In the manifest that accompanied *Passage*’s release, Jason Rohrer, the game’s creator, makes it clear that he intended to keep the game open to player interpretation:

Your interpretation of the game is more important than my intentions. ... There’s no “right” way to play *Passage*, just as there’s no right way to interpret it. ... Part of the goal, in fact, is to get you to reflect on the choices that you make while playing.¹⁴

At the same time, the game’s aesthetics and affordances hint at a very particular, much less open-ended interactive structure, namely that of platform games (such as Mario Bros., for instance): the screen is narrow indicating the centrality of horizontal movement; the avatar starts on the very left-hand side of the screen, nudging players to move rightwards; there is a score counter on the top right-hand side, indicating the possibility of playing the game more effectively; and certain activities such as opening treasure boxes add points to the counter. Rohrer admits as much: “All these mechanics together are meant to trick you into focusing on your score. The trick is that, in the end, you realize that your score is rather meaningless. There’s no leaderboard or anything like that.”¹⁵ So while players expect a tunneled interactive structure, they soon discover that they are in fact inhabiting a

very different interactive structure, a structure much closer to what Janet Murray (1997, p. 133) terms an “entangled rhizome.” When interaction takes place in a tightly controlled, linear environment, pleasure emerges predominantly from a sense of accomplishment—overcoming obstacles, solving the puzzle, racking up points, reaching the goal—and from experiencing flow. But to wander in an entangled rhizome, without the need to comply with a preformed plan or program, gives rise to a puzzling mixture of anxiety (resulting from a lack of clear structure or measurement of success) and comfort (produced by a sense of enclosure and postponement of the end), to a more complicated pleasure.

BEING, “ATTACHED TO A BIT OF CODE”

And then the girl, who had walked with me that whole time because that’s the way she was programmed and because that is what I ran into her for, died. And I realized at that moment that, in this video game world and as a shade of who I am as an actual person, I was not going to leave her grave behind. At that moment I didn’t care for what it meant to be attached to a bit of code or what it might imply about me that I didn’t want to let go, even though I thought about those things later.¹⁶

It is certainly tempting to fault Heidegger’s account of world disclosure for its quasi-mystical undertones, detecting, as Giorgio Agamben (2004, p. 59) does, a homology between the dynamics of concealment and disclosure and “the paradoxes of mystical knowledge—or, rather, nonknowledge.” But as the above, and other player testimonials show, videogames are indeed capable of producing moments of reflection and clarity. Such moments, I have argued, often emerge at the point where the game’s structure does not cohere with the game’s affordances, creating disruptions with the potential for world disclosure. But this is neither inevitable nor guaranteed: even the most ambitious interactive environment cannot promise enlightenment. It is therefore not surprising that not everyone who plays *Passage* confesses to having disclosive moments, or being enthusiastic about the game. Some find its austere aesthetics underwhelming, while others express a sense of confusion and bewilderment by the game’s lack of instructions or other apparent guidelines for play.¹⁷ Nonetheless, even these admittedly fair if sometimes unkind comments seem to do more to support the argument presented here than undermine it, since they point exactly to what I have described above as the game’s most important quality: its ability to create a mismatch between affordances and structure, the “in-order-to” and “towards-this.” Read this way, player frustration and wonderment equally indicate the interpretative openness that *Passage* offers, attesting to its disruptive experience.¹⁸

To treat the condition of being attached to a bit of game code as somehow less authentic than, say, using a physical hammer, ultimately does little to dull the

value of phenomenology as a means to articulate the ontological contours of our experiences. Heidegger’s model was built with traditional craft in mind, but the way it illustrates technical mediation—as a space generative, reflective, and refractive of meaning and significance—applies equally to playing a pixelated videogame as it does to hammering nails into shoes. That said, we cannot lose sight of the particularities of the technical mediation. We need to understand how digital media generates positionality or *nearness*: the sense in which an interface is indeed qualitatively different from the hammer. It is in this mode that I have suggested that what Heidegger explains as the conditions for world disclosure in the workshop—the interplay of concealment and unconcealment, triggered by equipmental failure—takes a more subtle form when considered in the context of digital media. The particularity of digital interactivity as a form of world disclosure, then, lies in the way it folds and regulates the duality of immersion and disruption into a single resonant experience.

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