Chapter 15
Jamming Econo:
The Phenomenon of Perspectival Shifts in Indie Video Games

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ABSTRACT

By their nature, video games create perspectival relationships between the game space, with its mechanics, characters, etc. and their players. Perspectival mechanics in games like Monument Valley *and* Fez *require one to simultaneously transform the environment, the objects in the environment, and one's egocentric reference frames, illustrating the complex nature intrinsic to video game spaces. The authors seek to investigate the ways perspectival mechanics in video games are both created and experienced using postphenomenological inquiry. This investigation is situated within the indie genre of games in particular, a context where these mechanics are intentionally being explored. In addition, this chapter draws parallels between indie games and indie music, contexts where boundary pushing is the norm. In addition to explicating the phenomenon of perspectival shifts in indie games, the authors review research related to spatial thinking, conjecturing affordances of indie games as geometric gifts, possibly well positioned to support spatial thinking.*

INTRODUCTION

However humble their origins in *Tennis for Two* (Higinbotham, 1958) and *Pong* (Atari Inc., 1972), video games have always offered a diverse range of player experiences, ranging from simple motor coordination games like *Pong* or *Asteroids* (Atari Inc., 1979) to text adventures like *Zork* (Infocom, 1977) and social online multi-user dungeons (MUDs), ASCII dungeon-crawling "rogues," and protean polygonal flight simulators. Over time, the diversity of genre under the rubric of "video games" has expanded. These old models – many of which endure – have been supplanted or modified into a whole host of genres and

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subgenres, from massive multiplayer online (MMO) games like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) to open-world exploration role-playing games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011). Simulated first person games like the *Bard's Tale* (Interplay Productions, 1985) and the Wizardry series begat current high fidelity first person shooters (FPSs) like *Far Cry 4* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2014) and *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2003). Two-dimensional (2D) side-scrolling platformer series, such as *Super Mario Bros*. (Nintendo, 1985), now exist in three-dimensional (3D) games like the planet-hopping, gravity-defying *Super Mario Galaxy* (Nintendo, 2007). Each one of these newer games might have features that were difficult in the early years of gaming: multiple game mechanics, varied challenges and goals, accommodation of flexible play styles, higher-resolution graphics, branching storylines, and mutable perspectives, to name a few. The convergence of these features of newer, complex games form the player's experience, wherein early games this was often from a mechanical perspective, featuring limited movement, actions, and player goals. For example, an early dungeon crawling shooter like *Berserk* (Yuke's Media Creations, 2004) might feature movement in eight directions and a limitation of one bullet at a time. This is quite simple compared to a supposedly simple, newer dungeon-crawler like *Diablo III* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2012), which features multiple menus and uses an entire keyboard or game controller to play. Obviously this comparison is stilted; this tiny list only scratches the surface of game genres available to current players, but it should serve to demonstrate the varied experiences one might encounter in the video game play space.

In this chapter, we explore perspectival shift in video games as both cultural signifier and video game mechanic, with a particular focus on current experimental and non-dogmatic use within the *indie,* short for independent, game development space. According to postphenomenologist Don Ihde, a perspectival shift is an ""extension" of perceptual and bodily intentionality into the smaller and larger "worlds" which were revealed through science and its instruments" (1993, p. 3). These traditional instruments and tools might be a microscope, telescope, compass, or a high-speed camera affording viewers alternate glimpses of time. Ihde notes that our perceptions are mediated by these instruments, referring to them as mediating technologies (1993). An example includes looking through a telescope to view the surface of the moon. Although we view the same moon we might see with the naked eye, the telescope shifts both our access to detail and the moon's size relative to the vast sky. With these technologies, our world becomes embodied differently, affording perspectival shifts.

Video games might possess the ability to be such a mediating technology, allowing players to engage with spatial relationships through the shifting and exploration of unique perspectives. Shifting and controlling player perspectives is a huge concern in the development of video games, which often changes as game design and development progresses. The Halo series started as a third-person game before settling on the first-person point-of-view (POV) for which it is known. The aforementioned "AAA" games – referring to games supported by large budgets and wide mainstream publicity and promotion – feature perspectival game mechanics, usually centered on the level of player camera movement and control, as well as what the player sees in the environment. Within each one of these game experiences lies a unique perspective or POV – whether technical, narrative, or spatial. Throughout time, most AAA developers might include a few compelling or unique game mechanics in larger games that involve the manipulation of perspective, but, besides the rare example of a perspective-shifting game like *Portal* (Valve Corporation, 2007) from popular game developer, publisher, and retailer Valve, most major perspective shifts happen incrementally. However, a major jump in video games happened during the transition from the Super Nintendo and Genesis generation to the era of CD-Roms, the Playstation, the Nintendo 64, and early 3D games, requiring a reworking of controllers and an expansion of game mechanics into the brave