Discord and the role of digital bodies

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In this essay, I argue that digital bodies, i.e. avatars, are not necessary or essential for digital objects or environments when said object's intended function is to recede into the horizon. This essay is a limited exploration of the role of digital bodies in digital platforms. First, I unpack Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, which highlights the role of the body in perceiving and interacting with the world. Then, I unpack Simondon's outline of technical objects, which leads to Yuk Hui's ontology of digital objects. This serves as the foundation of my analysis of Discord as a digital object and the role of the body.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002), translated by Colin Smith, Merleau-Ponty explores the essence of the body and objects, outlines his object-horizon structure, and discusses the fundamentals of perception. He cares about perception because "our perception ends in objects, and the object once constituted, appears as the reason for all the experiences of it which we have had or could have" (p. 77). Thus, the basis of our knowledge and interactions with the world rests on perception. He begins his exploration of the nature of objects by contrasting an account of the essence of objects stated by Leibniz, who says "the house seen from nowhere" is the essence of the house (p. 78). Leibniz says the essence of objects is not physical per se, rather it is a "geometrized projection", the abstraction of an object. Contrastingly, Merleau-Ponty says "the house seen from everywhere" is the true essence of the house. This shift stems from the importance of perception. He acknowledges the impossibility of viewing the house from "everywhere", as we are physically unable to. He says we begin grasping the house seen from everywhere by starting at a natural, or arbitrary chosen perspective. Perhaps we see the house from the road, and can only see the front of the

house and some of its features, such as the front-facing windows and doors. If we look at it from the back, we see more of the house. The point is, if we view the house from every possible angle, "if there is to be an absolute object, it will have to consist of an infinite number of different perspectives compressed into a strict co-existence, and to be presented as it were to a host of eyes all engaged in one concerted act of seeing" (p. 81). Thus, the house seen from everywhere is the essence of the house.

Merleau-Ponty says perception is done through gazes, not through mechanical sight. He introduces two concepts: focuses and horizons. When we look at something, we focus on something, e.g. the house, from a specific perspective. Everything else recedes into the background, i.e. the horizon. This is an act of two faucets: gazing and switching between horizons. He says when we focus on an object, other objects become horizons, and horizons become objects. For example, if a house is next to a mountain, when I focus on the house, the mountain recedes into the horizon, and thus becomes a horizon itself. Then, when I focus on the mountain, I shift from an object to a horizon, in which the mountain returns from a horizon and becomes an object. Thus, "to see is to enter a universe of beings which display themselves" and "thus every object is the mirror of all others" (p. 79).

Merleau-Ponty says the body is unique because it necessitates our fixed perspective of the world, as we are unable to view anything without our bodies. Thus, our perception is locked into our body's perspective. He notes the body is a peculiar object, which is understood both through other objects, and through its resistance to being perceived by all other perspectives. He drives home the significance of the body's uniqueness by describing a view of a church through his window. He says "my window may impose upon me a point of view of the church, it is necessary in the first place that my body should impose upon me one of the world" (p. 104). This imposition is a key feature of the body, as through its imposition, we are able to perceive, and hence be in the world. The question is whether the body is an

object, i.e. whether it can recede into a horizon when we focus on some other object. One might argue yes, the body is an object because it recedes into a horizon when we are sufficiently immersed in our interactions or perception of something. For example, when we watch a movie, we forget that we are in a theatre, with other people. Because we are no longer conscious of our body, it recedes into a horizon. Others might say the body is not an object, because we are always conscious of our body, for as Merleau-Ponty points out, the body is an affecting thing, i.e. it can feel kinesthetic sensations. The body also necessarily has double sensations because it is an affecting thing. When we hold an object, we necessarily feel the object by picking it up and moving it around. Therefore, interactions necessitate bodily sensations, and therefore our body will never recede. The problem with this is with consciousness. When we pick an object up, are we conscious of how the object feels, or are we unconsciously, unthinkingly feeling an object? Under Merleau-Pontyism, a necessary but insufficient criterion for something to be an object is its ability to be a horizon, to recede into a horizon, and to shift between "horizon-being" to "object-being" (to my knowledge, Merleau-Ponty and Colin Smith did not use the phrases "horizon-being" and "object-being"). The question remains: do our bodies sufficiently recede into a horizon? Do our bodies recede at all? This question is not central to this paper. Rather, it serves as a useful exploration into the nature of objects itself, as this puzzle, i.e. whether something even recedes into a horizon, and whether there are degrees of receding into horizons, will surface in our discussion below.

In *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (2016), Gilbert Simondon published his thesis on technical objects. Simondon says technical objects are things which have technical components which constitute the object itself. For example, a plane is made out of many parts, e.g. a turbine, wings, a set of landing gears, &c, each of which are technical objects themselves, e.g. the landing gear is made of components which extends and retracts the plane's wheels when necessary. Not all technical objects are made of smaller technical

objects; it merely so happens that a plane itself is a technical object which is made of technical objects. A distinction between Simondon's technical objects and Merleau-Ponty's objects is that Simondon focuses on the technical nature of objects, while Merleau-Ponty does not. The problem is that Simondon does not give an explicit definition of technical objects. Instead, he describes how technical objects are. For example, "The technical object is situated at the meeting point between two milieus, and it must be integrated into both milieus at once" (Simondon, 2016, p. 55). Here, he describes an essential nature of technical objects: being integrated into two milieus, i.e. environments, simultaneously. A landing gear is extended and retracted by gears and other moving parts. These parts exist in a milieu which is separate from a different milieu in which the landing gear is a wheel in contact with the ground, thus allowing the plane to land smoothly. While the object in question is the same, the two milieus are likened to two different reference frames, where the focus of the first milieu is on each technical part working together to serve an intended function (in this case, to extend/retract a set of wheels), and the second milieu's focus is on the plane as a vehicle. Another key feature of technical objects is adaptation, or maladaptation. Technical objects can be maladaptive in certain milieus. Simondon describes how specific electric generators and transformers are designed to serve specific purposes. For example, "a clock synchronized by a grid loses all capacity for functioning if it is brought from America to France, because of the different frequency (60 Hertz and 50 Hertz)" (p. 54). Technical objects are sometimes intended to be used in specific milieus. When said technical object is removed from its intended milieu, it may underperform, or no longer work as intended. This is important as Simondon describes how objects exist and are dependent on its physical environment. In contrast, Merleau-Ponty makes no claim about how objects change when they become/enter different horizons, as his thesis' ultimate goal was on perception.

In *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (2016), Yuk Hui outlines his conceptualisation of digital objects. He says "the digital objects to be discussed in this book are data objects formalized by metadata and metadata schemes, which could be roughly understood as ontologies" (p. 26). He also says "digital [objects] shouldn't be understood merely in terms of ones and zeros but rather as the capacity to process data" (p. 25). He says this because of his position on information and object reduction. He believes such information merely describes certain qualities or relations of the object. Thus, Yuk Hui believes in an "order of granularities", i.e. that digital objects are indeed made of ones and zeros, but not just that (p. 23). One must consider "a digital object's relation to other digital objects" to form "networks" (p. 26). These "networks, which are connected by protocols and standards, constitute what I call a digital milieu" (p. 26). He believes digital objects should be considered within orders of magnitude. For example, Discord is made of software, and runs on hardware. Its software consists of, e.g. .exe, .bin, .dll, &c, which itself is built using JavaScript, C++, &c, i.e. programming languages, which itself is ones and zeros. Thus, Discord as a software exists in multiple orders of magnitude. Discord as a hardware also exists in multiple orders of magnitude. Discord is available on Windows, iOS, Android, macOS, &c, which are all devices running on different architectures. The client-side hardware is meaningfully different from the server-side hardware, i.e. Discord's servers, internet and cloud infrastructure. All computers and infrastructure are made of components, e.g. CPUs, GPUs, and SSDs, which are made of thousands and thousands of transistors, which process electrical signals. Thus Discord's hardware also exists on multiple orders of magnitudes. Yuk Hui considers orders of magnitude because it is a key part of resolutions, i.e. the process where differing orders of magnitude meet which leads to a reconceptualisation. He says "we may find a resolution amounting to a jump that traverses different orders of magnitude. [...] the material construction acts as "information" that triggers the resolution of tensions between two

different orders of magnitude and consequently changes the whole structure" (p. 31). Thus, by considering a digital object in totality, we arrive at a greater understanding. Thus, Discord is a digital object better understood through its orders of magnitude. Yuk Hui goes into great detail about his method—orders of magnitude—such as its imprecision. But for this paper, this will suffice.

Released in 2015 by Jason Citron and Stan Vishnevskiy, Discord is a communication service which targets gamers as a means of "[communicating] with friends around the world while playing games online" (Discord, n.d.). For context, a key demand/pain point of gamers is a means of communicating to friends seamlessly and effortlessly while playing single-player or multiplayer video games. Gamers want to hang out digitally while playing Stardew Valley, or work as a team while playing Valorant. The easiest and most efficient way of doing that is by talking to each other. VOIP, i.e. voice calls transmitted via the internet, does exactly that. For brevity, I take Discord to be voice-first, or voice-centric, i.e. voice communication is the primary means of communication, while all other modes of communication are secondary, e.g. text, video. Given that it is voice-centric, Discord opts for the lack of digital avatars which exist in "metaverses" such as Minecraft or Meta's Metaverse, where players control (and are embodied by) digital (three-dimensional) avatars. Discord still has avatars in the form of profile pictures, usernames, &c, but for Discord, it is significantly distinct from the likes of Minecraft and Meta's Metaverse (which is intended to be lifelike and appropriate for business and social events). Thus, because of Discord's primary goal of being a seamless voice communication platform, Discord wants to recede to the horizon. Discord does not want its users to consider it as a technical object, or as a digital object with complex orders of magnitude. Discord does not benefit by inserting (three-dimensional) avatars because it is voice-centric. You do not need a (3D) digital body to talk. This highlights the fact that people need not be embodied by the digital objects they are interacting

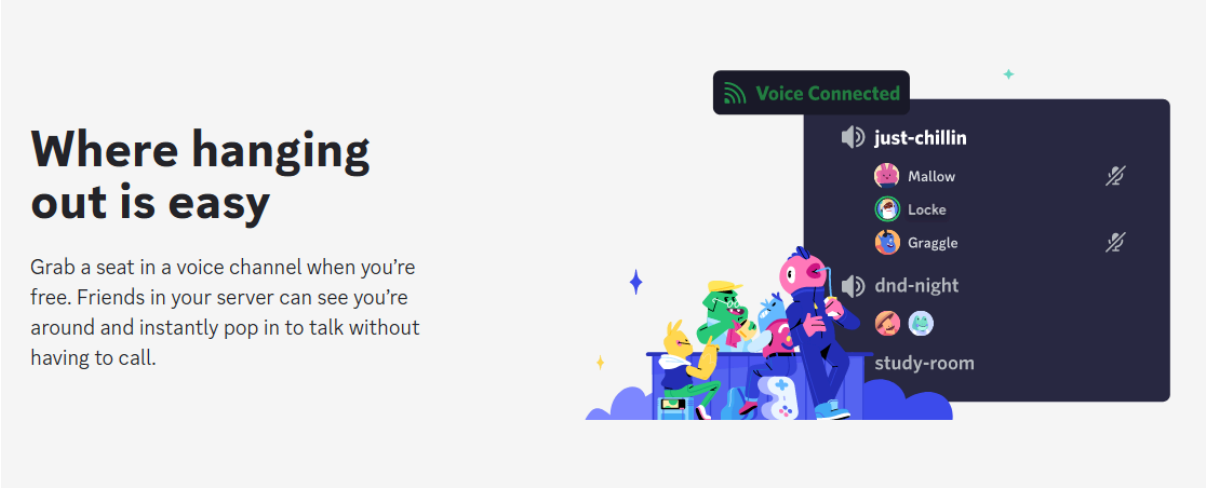
with. Strictly speaking, all they need is themselves, nothing more. This is not the case for other platforms, such as Minecraft, as it is a sandbox game, where the primary purpose is to build, interact and survive within a sandbox world. This necessitates a (3D) digital body. People are able to essentially live a digital life. Contrastingly, Discord is sufficiently functional without digital bodies precisely because communication through the internet sufficiently needs a user interface, nothing more.

Discord does have digital avatars, but only as a marketing tool to represent gamers without using models or personalities as stand-ins. This is seen in Figure 1 where digital avatars exemplify Discord's voice communication feature. From Figure 1 alone, one can argue Discord has (2D) digital avatars in the form of profile pictures, usernames, &c. However, the digital avatars in Figure 1 are really representations of gamers as seen in Figure 2, which shows a video call, i.e. actual people. Further, one could argue Discord's digital avatars, i.e. profile pictures and usernames, are essential because they are identifiers. You know who is on call and who you are talking to by simply glancing at their identity, which is represented by their avatar, i.e. their picture and username. I would argue that digital avatars recede into the background and are inessential to Discord as when you are in-game, because Discord and all its aspects recede into the background. What is in focus is not Discord as a digital object, but simply your friends' voices, specifically what they are saying, and the video game you are playing. Thus, essential to your gaming experience and usage of Discord is not the digital avatars, but the video game itself, and the communication you give and receive. When Discord as a technical object, i.e. the tensions between its orders of magnitude, are in focus, it means Discord is not functioning as intended. The experience is no longer seamless. You would be in a state of distress, troubleshooting Discord, i.e. attempting to fix a connection or voice issue. Only then would you need to play around with Discord's settings, thus consider Discord as a digital and technical object. Only then would you be conscious of

the totality of Discord's order of magnitude, i.e. understand how Discord works on various levels, to identify and fix a problem. Thus, similar to the movie theatre example above, when you are fully immersed in a video game, when everything works, you are no longer conscious of Discord or its functions.

Figure 1

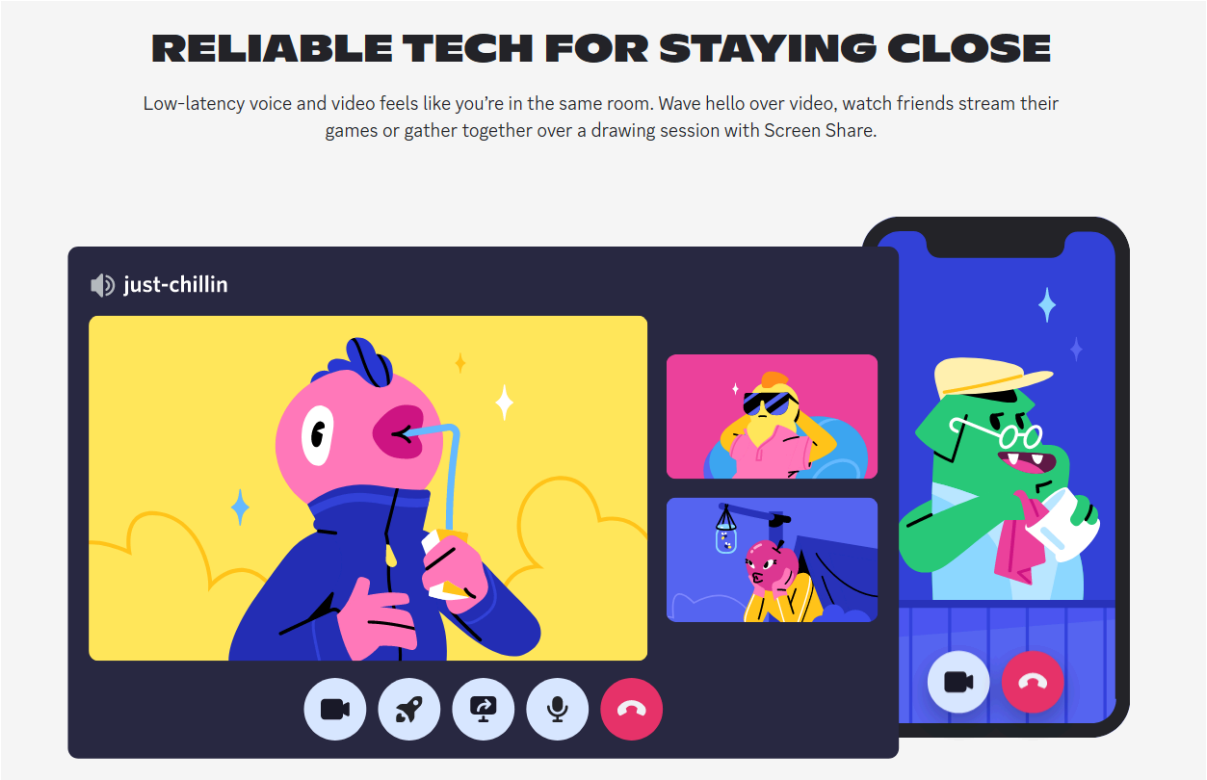
The landing page of Discord where its VOIP feature is highlighted via digital avatars.



Note. Taken from Discord, n.d.

Figure 2

Discord's video call feature is being highlighted and represented via digital avatars.



Note. Taken from Discord, n.d.

There is a lot more to say about the role of the body and digital avatars within digital objects. I end this essay with an insight into the metaverse. It would be strange to claim Discord is a metaverse, precisely because it lacks the kind of digital avatar which embodies the user in a digital environment. Discord is a digital environment where people can socialise, communicate, and play video games, but it is not a metaverse because it does not aim to be one, and therefore does not need a digital body like Minecraft or Meta's Metaverse. Contrastingly, Meta's Metaverse requires digital bodies because of how it is designed. It aims to be a kind of digital environment which has all the "technical" aspects of the physical world. People can shake hands, and see body and facial cues. One might even be fully immersed, and consequently no longer be conscious of one's body. However, the problem with digital avatars is it is not double-sensory. When you shake hands in Meta's Metaverse, you do not actually feel someone else's hand. You feel the controller you are holding. You become conscious of your headset, and your actual, physical body. One could argue this

limitation is inherent to current technologies, and that future technologies will allow users to experience kinesthetic sensations worthy of immersion. Perhaps, one day, when you eat in Meta's Metaverse, you genuinely consume food in tandem with your digital actions. But that does not make your digital body an affecting body. It is your physical body which is eating, chewing, tasting, &c. You will never feel through your digital body. You will never talk via your digital avatar. Even if technology is able to give you a hyper-immersive experience where one can "live" in digital objects, and have digital lives, at some point, you will be conscious of your body, of the digital object and its order of magnitude, of its technical aspects. Your body will forever impose itself onto you and the world. Consequently, it will always impose itself onto digital objects, no matter how much it recedes into the horizon. The metaverse will never be the primary environment we live in precisely because of our body's impositions. Thus, this line of reasoning allows us to be sceptical of the direction of Meta's Metaverse.

References

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