Enacting Virtual Reality

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One of the tenets of enactive cognition is that it has “no location” (Di Paolo 2009), which means that it is not bounded within the brain-body system but constitutively involves the environment. This “structural coupling” involves the bare world and tools and technologies included in it. The aim of this paper is double: more generally, exploring the modalities of this technological, material involvement. More contingently, trying to apply theoretical assumptions to the study case offered by virtual reality (VR).

The choice of VR is related to the kind of experience it brings forth. In fact, it functions as a surrogate of the real world. All audiovisual media engage us in a way that produces a more or less intense detachment from ecological reality that can be explored from the perspective of embodied cognition (Gallese, Guerra 2019). Still, VR is unique because of a simple characteristic: while with other audiovisual media we can simply *look at* something, through VR we can *perform actions into a virtual world*. As already demonstrated experimentally (Ehrsson 2007), this engagement produces powerful illusions - namely, out-of-body experiences - that demonstrate how fragile and world-dependent the feeling of body ownership actually is.

Therefore, VR can be conceived as evidence of enactive cognition. Likewise, this technology’s implications can be fully appreciated if approached enactively, that is only if VR is explored as an alternative world capable of producing new sensorimotor regularities.

References

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