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Virtual Existentialism

Meaning and Subjectivity in Virtual Worlds

Stefano Gualeni
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FOREWORD: THE COMPUTER GAMEWORLD AS AN EXISTENTIAL COMMITMENT

“I don’t like it here. I don’t know what’s going on. We’re both stumbling around together in this unformed world whose rules and objectives are largely unknown, seemingly undecipherable or even possibly nonexistent, always on the verge of being killed by forces we don’t understand!”—so laments the character Ted Pikul in David Cronenberg’s 1999 thriller *eXistenZ*, in a scene where the events in the hyperrealistic virtual reality game called *eXistenZ* have turned sour and Pikul is contemplating a way out. The movie *eXistenZ* is all about the blurring of the border between the game and reality. This blurring is greatly aided by conventions of cinema: thanks to the ambiguity afforded by the structure of the narrative, and the camera’s third-person perspective onto beings in the world, the viewer shares Pikul’s anxiety as they are both sometimes unable to tell with any degree of certainty whether events in a given scene are happening inside the actual world or within the gameworld of *eXistenZ*.

The borders between gameworlds and the actual world are also blurred in real life. Those seeking to escape the burden of everyday life can quickly find themselves under the weight of existence also in a computer game, even without the use of game interfaces grown from fertilized amphibian eggs stuffed with synthetic DNA like those conjured up by Cronenberg. Gameworlds can be peculiar places. In them, we find aspects we are familiar with due to actual world experiences like embodiment anchoring us in a location, gravity giving weight to things, and time passing in a linear fashion. We are, however, equally likely to find aspects that are strange and alien to our actual-worldly being, like omnipresent existence and multi-directional time. In this light, it would perhaps be unwise to expect to

develop subjectivities in gameworlds in ways that are similar to how we develop them in the actual world.

In the past two decades of academic computer game studies, talk on gameworlds has often referred to the gameworld as an environment or space, a container for an activity. From this perspective, questions pertaining to both the form of the space and its appearance are relevant: how large is the gameworld, how is it structured, and what does it look like? Perhaps due to the affinity of first-wave ludology to game design research, this notion of gameworld is very similar to game designers' pragmatic and utilitarian considerations of gameworlds as arenas consisting of 3D models, scripts, and textures, designed to facilitate the activity of gameplay. If a story of any kind plays a central role in giving meaning to gameplay activities in the particular game, the gameworld in question may be considered a fictional one. Here, the scholar might ask: how do aspects of the game's fictional world correspond with gameplay activities? How do these elements support each other? The primary material for those interested in the gameworld as a gameplay arena or as a fictional universe is the game itself, for example as a software package or a 'text' of some kind.

If the game under scrutiny is a multiplayer online game, the notion acquires a new flavour: the gameworld becomes a site of social activity, and a host of topics and questions becomes relevant. Culture in the gameworld emerges, warranting not only anthropological but also ethical, political, financial, and legal interest. What do people do in the gameworld and why? How are their actions in the gameworld related to what they do outside the game? How do they interact? What kind of ethical relations with each other they enter into? What kind of ideology prevails in the gameworld? Furthermore, if events in the gameworld involve financial interests, economics and legal scholars also express interest, curious about how money moves in this gameworld, and how its movements are regulated. For this perspective, the primary material for analysis is to be found beyond the confines of the software package and its runtime behaviour: the gameworld as a social world is larger than the game itself.

Common to the two perspectives mentioned above is that they consider the gameworld as either a technological-material and/or social 'thing', something 'out there' waiting to be studied. This might appear somewhat precarious to the phenomenologically inclined: to study a world without studying the *being* in the world. Like the psychologist in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Sketch for a Theory of Emotions* (1962), who was forbidden to

consider his patients as humans like himself, these perspectives can only indirectly address questions pertaining to subjectivity.

In his account of fiction and embodiment in single-player computer games, Rune Klevjer (2006, 110–111) hints at the possibility for a third kind of perspective on computer gameworlds, a perspective which could perhaps lead us closer to subjectivity: “[s]imulated environments of computer games are ‘worlds’ not only because they can trigger our imaginations, or because they constitute a rule-based and self-contained ‘magic circle’ of meaningful activity, or because they may be sensorially immersive, but also, and more importantly, because they are world-like in terms of our mode of interacting with them”.

The textually oriented games scholar found the game world in the software package and its run-time behaviour. The anthropologist’s gameworld was located in the assemblage formed by the game and its players. Through a phenomenological lens, we can locate the gameworld in the player’s experience, where it appears as an ‘existential commitment’ (Leino 2013, 9). The relevant questions here are: what kind of commitment is this? What is it like to be in a gameworld? Simultaneously facilitating and resisting the player’s projects, the game makes its player responsible for the freedom she enjoys as a player. The player faces a risk of failure and a consequent expulsion from the world, and should she want to remain a player, she must be willing to deal with the game’s resistance. The player is being subjected to a ‘gameplay condition’ (Leino 2009).

Similarly, Sebastian Möring (2016) argues that “games are essentially existential structures whose gameplay requires care to ensure its ongoing existence”. Our responsibility for our freedom is what keeps in-game interactions meaningful and interesting: without the fear of losing this freedom, our experience of gameworld would quickly oscillate towards boredom (Möring 2014). This dynamic of freedom and responsibility is what turns the game environment, the container, the social realm, into a gameworld.

The nature of computer games as existential structures is what Hubert Dreyfus (2009) missed in his existential critique of the virtual world *Second Life*. Reviewing *Second Life* in terms of its potential for self-discovery and identity exploration, Dreyfus (2009, 102) suggests that “[...] while the safe experimentation of *Second Life* is easy and can give you superficial satisfactions as in a synthetic Mardi Gras, only a bold experiment with the real possibility of having to deal with the consequences of failure could help you discover what is really possible and worthwhile for you”.

Commenting on Edward Castronova's (2005, 276) visions of exodus to synthetic worlds—a topic also lucidly addressed by Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella in this book—Dreyfus (2009, 93) suggests that *Second Life* does not afford a “sense of wonder and the sacred”, as it cannot give us the experience of “being in the grip of mysterious powers that have authority over you. That sort of power is expressed in the traditional myths but is necessarily lacking in the programmed gods and goblins we willfully invent and can completely command and understand” (ibid.). While Dreyfus' observations serve to highlight the specificity of computer game-worlds as a subset of virtual worlds, the assumption that virtual beings suffer from an inherent ‘essential poverty’ (Sartre 2010, 9) seems off the mark, given that users and players can indeed be surprised by what happens in these worlds (Leino 2010, 229–231), as Gualeni and Vella also note in this book. Most importantly, Dreyfus' failure to find existential significance in *Second Life* by comparing it to the first life is also testimony to Gualeni and Vella's very insightful observation in this book, that the value of virtual worlds to self-discovery and experimentation is not to be found by simply holding up virtual worlds as alternatives to actual world, but rather considering them as new existential domains which are intertwined and overlapping with (and depend on) our being in the actual world.

While I have so far focused explicitly on computer gameworlds, Gualeni and Vella do not restrict the argument of this book to computer game-worlds only. Instead, they talk about virtual worlds and posit computer gameworlds as a subset of virtual worlds. Initially this might seem like a throwback to the time when computer games were not considered worthy of academic study, and all kinds of euphemisms from ‘multimedia entertainment’ to ‘virtual worlds’ had to be invented. However, a closer look reveals that the authors' chosen perspective is timely and relevant, since both ‘gameness’ and ‘virtuality’ are undergoing transformations. The paradigmatic ideas of games and play as the core ingredients in the software packages we are accustomed to calling ‘computer games’ need rethinking. For example, a genre of open-ended art games has emerged, consisting of games which present aesthetically interesting worlds for players to explore but lack any gameplay condition (Leino 2009, 2010, 2012) whatsoever. Meanwhile, commercialized forms of computer gaming, known as ‘e-sports’, risk turning play from autotelic to paratelic (Apter 1992) and thus likening it to work and other ‘serious’ activities. We have also seen game elements, under the guise of ‘gamification’, entering places that were previously off-limits. Virtuality, in the sense of both world and

reality, has become mundane. Since computer games have gone mainstream, people of all ages visit gameworlds on their smartphones regularly while making no fuss about it. Shopping malls have arcades with virtual reality technology, making use of content and applications that blend both ludic and non-ludic elements and place their users in both active and passive positions. Similar equipment is available for home use, allowing virtual worlds to take their place in one's actual living room. In these circumstances, paying fundamentalist exclusive allegiance to game studies, philosophy of computer games, or existential ludology would have done no good to the framing of the authors' project. It is quite sensible that Gualeni and Vella chose to not restrict the scope of the argument and instead straddled the traditions of philosophy of technology, virtual worlds research, computer game studies, and philosophy of computer games.

Virtual Existentialism: Meaning and Subjectivity in Virtual Worlds manifests intellectual curiosity and dynamism, as the authors engage, in addition to existential thought, with a wide range of perspectives, including those of dramatherapy, religious studies, and live-action role-playing (LARP) studies, and draw also from thinkers who might not at the first glance come across as existentialists, like Helmuth Plessner and Peter W. Zapffe. *Virtual Existentialism* is faithful to the technological specificity and mediality of computer games and virtual worlds and carries no unnecessary theoretical or conceptual baggage.

Game studies will benefit from the account of being-in-the-virtual-world carefully built by Gualeni and Vella in *Virtual Existentialism*, not the least because it allows us to get over the simplifying assumptions of the gameworld as a container and steers our attention to the intentional unity between the playing subject and the gameworld. Those involved in philosophy of computer games will find the vocabulary newly established by Gualeni and Vella, such as 'virtual subjectivity', 'attitude of virtuality', and 'virtual project' useful directly out of the box. For game scholars, there are also plenty of new connections that shed light on questions of play and virtuality. For example, while Eugen Fink is often mentioned when theorizing play, we have seldom seen his work being applied onto virtual worlds and gameworlds. Likewise, while the discussion on en-roling and de-roling may be familiar to those in LARP studies, showing how these notions work if applied to virtual worlds is fresh to many readers. Those in philosophy of technology will find that *Virtual Existentialism* provides an accurate take on contemporary debates on worldness, subjectivity, and

experience in philosophy of computer games and shows how the significance of these debates resonates well beyond computer games.

Virtual Existentialism is a timely and highly original account of the positive, negative, and ambiguous existential effects of virtual world experiences and the built-in potential for dealing with virtual worlds that can be leveraged on the grounding of our actual existence.

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INTRODUCTION AND GLOSSARY OF TERMS

How do experiences in (and of) virtual environments affect the ways in which individual human beings understand and attribute meaning to their own existence? In this book, we adopt a variety of scholarly perspectives in the combined attempt to understand and answer that question.

For the most part, as the title of this volume indicates, our efforts are inspired by the philosophical current of existentialism, a predominantly European twentieth-century approach to the human individual's being, acting, feeling, and pursuit of meaning in the world. Themes such as those of freedom, care, projectuality, duty, and finitude are recurrent in various declinations of existentialism. Generally speaking, and differently from many philosophical currents that preceded it, existentialism does not understand the human subject as a centre of experience that can be conceptually separated from the world (or worlds) that they inhabit. Instead, it approaches the human condition as one that is constituted and constantly shaped by the worlds which human beings find themselves 'thrown into'. Importantly, from an existentialist perspective, our existence as beings-in-the-world precedes our attempts to imbue that existence with meaning.

This book's drive is twofold: It uses existential philosophy as a frame through which to understand and interpret the significance of virtual environments in the context of our existence. At the same time, it considers how our capacity to be in (and towards) these technologically mediated domains might lead to new understandings of the concerns of existential philosophy.