Chapter 47
The Trajectivity of Virtual Worlds

Christophe Duret
Université de Sherbrooke, Canada

ABSTRACT

This chapter will propose an ontology of virtual environments that calls into question the dichotomy between the real and the virtual. This will draw on the concepts of trajectivity and "médiance" in order to describe the way virtual environments, with their technological and symbolic features, take part in the construction of human environments. This theoretical proposition will be illustrated with the analysis of Arcadia, a virtual environment built in Second Life. Finally, a meso-criticism will be proposed as a new approach for the study of virtual environments.

INTRODUCTION[1]

According to Stéphane Vial (2016), "there is a profane metaphysics that operates at the heart of the contemporary imagination, which postulates that the human world is bisected by an invisible border that separates the so-called real and the so-called virtual" (p. 135).

However no meaning of "virtual" validates this dichotomy, so it would be more appropriate to speak of "digital monism" (Vial, 2014; Stimler & Vial, 2014) to describe the phenomenon of virtual environments, a formulation which "states that the human reality is a digital-centered hybrid environment made of mixed systems and matters constantly interlinked, that tends to form a single continuous multimaterial artifactual substance." (Stimler & Vial, 2014, para. 4). This profane metaphysics underpins the opposition between cyberspace and 'meatspace', borrowed from cyberpunk literature, or between offline and online. This has been widely disseminated by various web commentators, and also by researchers.

This chapter will propose an ontology of virtual worlds that calls into question the dichotomy between the real and the virtual. This will draw on the concepts of trajectivity and *médiance* (Berque, 2000) in order to describe the way virtual worlds, with their technological and symbolic features, take part in the construction of milieus (or "human environments") (first part: *Background*). This theoretical proposition will be illustrated with the analysis of *Arcadia*, a virtual world built in *Second Life* (second part: *Second Life's Arcadia as a Virtual World*). Finally, a mesocriticism will be proposed as a new approach for the study of virtual worlds (third part: *Future research directions*).

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BACKGROUND

Researches into virtual worlds in the 1990s and 2000s are characterized by their tendency to consider them separate areas from the real world, betraying a perspective Nathan Jurgenson (2012) calls "digital dualism". As Doel & Clarke (1999) and Latzko-Toth & Proulx (2006) point out, typi cal of this dualism are the epistemological postures making virtuality a degraded representation of reality or a solution to correct its flaws, the first reflecting a vision of the virtual as a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1981), the second being put forward by techno-optimist authors such as Howard Rheingold (2000).

"Virtual" is a term whose meaning varies over history and from one researcher to another. In its long history, it has in turn been synonymous with the potential, the artificial and the simulational (Vial, 2014).

The virtual is known primarily as that which exists potentially, as opposed to what exists actually. Thus, in the eighteenth century, the science of mechanics called "virtual realities of the physics" the matrix of possibilities in which the empirical world represents an actualization (Latzko-Toth & Proulx, 2006). Following on from this, the virtual "is nothing other than an ontological regime, a particular way of being real, that which, in short, *exists without manifesting itself*" (Vial, 2014, p. 179, original in italics). Thus, the virtual is real without being actual (Deleuze, 1996; Granger, 1995; Lévy, 1998).

In the field of optics, the virtual is given a second meaning. For the physicists, the virtual image is an image perceived by the eye that comes from an optical instrument, as opposed to the actual image, which is present on a screen. According to Vial (2014), the term "real" here as opposed to "virtual" is inappropriate, since in both cases they are discernible realities; the virtual image is real, but artificial.

In the field of IT, finally, the virtual becomes 'simulational'. That is, as in optics, an artificial form, and more specifically, a "process capable, via programming techniques, of simulating a digital behavior *independently* of the physical medium on which (paradoxically) it *depends*" (Vial, 2014, p. 181, original in italics). While the simulacrum is a matter of lies and illusion, points out Vial (2014), simulations are artificially constructed but ontologically real. The virtual is thus equivalent to a computer model. It translates the concept as an idealized version of the modelled object (Latzko-Toth & Proulx, 2006), since it retains from the latter only a few characteristics and behaviors deemed relevant. This implies, as outlined by Gonzalo Frasca (2003) with his concept of simulation rhetoric, that the model conveys the point of view of the author.

The virtual understood as simulational is not unrelated to the term defined by Charles Sanders Peirce (1974). Indeed, according to him "a virtual X (where X is a common noun) is something, not an X, which has the efficiency (virtus) of an X." (p. 261) In other words, a virtual object (a simulation) produces the same effect as the simulated object without merging with it. This is the case of an Internet forum, for instance, which, like the agora, is a facilitator of debates and discussions. As such, the virtual cannot be equated to 'potential' as it is, according to Peirce, "almost its contrary. For the potential *X* is the nature of *X,* but is without actual efficiency" (p. 261)

It is from the late 1980s, mentions Vial (2014), that some digital thinkers merge the meanings of the term "virtual" as both simulational and potential. During this era there appeared a profane metaphysics dichotomizing the real and the virtual, that he describes as a form of phenomenological judgment in response to the shock caused by the arrival of digital interfaces in the perceptual habits of individuals (Vial, 2016). This judgment at first led to the idea of a real world separate from a virtual world. But since then, incorporated into daily practices, the new realities that accompanied the digital revolution, (videogames, social media, etc.) have become commonplace. Thus, "by being integrated into our world experience, they create a new phenomenological viewing point by which virtual beings of the digital