

Are we real in Virtual Worlds?

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at investigating the interpretation of virtual world reality. There are two major designations that are frequently used to differentiate online and offline settings: they are the 'virtual world' and the 'actual world'. These terms are often understood as antonyms. In general, there is an assumption that things that happen in the actual world are real, whereas in contrast, things that happen in virtual worlds are artificial. It is useful to look at the definition of 'world' before getting into the discussion of actual and virtual worlds.

Keywords: *virtual, reality, space, online world, actual world*

INTRODUCTION

In Boellstorff's Understanding

'World' tends to refer to large-scale social contexts with visual and interactive components, somewhat like 'environment' and 'space.' This differs from the more abstract notion of 'community' or the more individualistic notion of 'life,' as in 'Second Life' (not 'Second World,' despite the fact that most residents saw it as a virtual world) (Boellstorff, 2008, pp. 17 – 18).

How do these virtual worlds compare with the actual, everyday world, with its meanings, cultural fields, categories and practices? We can extend this question by considering the extent to which the virtual world can be read or treated as a form of reality. Chalmers addresses this question by inverting it:

Is virtual reality real? The most common view is that virtual reality is a sort of fictional or illusory reality, and that what goes on in virtual reality is not truly real. I will define the opposite view: virtual reality is a sort of genuine reality, and what goes on in virtual reality is truly real (Chalmers, n.d., p. 1).

And he outlines four propositions that support this approach:

- Virtual objects really exist and are computational objects;
- Events in virtual worlds are largely computational events that really take place;

- Experiences in virtual reality involve non-illusory perception of a computational world;
- Virtual experiences of a computational world are about as valuable as non-virtual experiences of a non-computational world (Chalmers, n.d., p. 2).

The Differences between 'Real' and 'Actual'

In order to overcome this rather problematical semantic issue, in this paper I do not use the term 'real', but instead will use 'actual' to refer to those activities that take place in the offline world. This decision is influenced by claims, emanating from figures such as Deleuze, Friedberg, Levy, Massumi and Virilio, that the virtual is not the opposite of the real but of the actual (Deleuze, 2004; see also Friedberg, 2006; Levy, 1998; Massumi, 2002; Virilio, 1994). Moreover, the expression 'the actual world' is used to explain or describe all kinds of human activities that happen beyond the interaction with a virtual space or environment, such as in *Second Life*. Boellstorff writes, for instance, that "I do not oppose 'virtual' and 'real'; I refer to places of human culture not realized by computer programs through the Internet as parts of the 'actual world'" (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 21).

How does 'actual' differ from 'real'? 'Real' can be applied to both the actual and the virtual world. In order to make this claim clear, we can approach it indirectly by asking a question about virtual worlds, such as *Second Life*: in these worlds are actions such as a conversation,

Are we real in Virtual Worlds?

attending church, or visiting a place, considered to be real? The answer to this question is that they are treated and experienced as if they were real, at least by some of the people involved. Even though these activities are taking place in virtual worlds, they are real in the sense that they are undertaken by people and can have socio-cultural consequences. Boellstorff notes, for instance, that “virtual worlds increasingly have ‘real’ ramifications – a business, an educational course, an online partner becoming a ‘real’ spouse” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 21). In this case, using the term ‘real’ is not precise or useful when describing the actual world and its culture and activities. The notion of, and meanings associated with, the ‘real’ are applicable for both actual and virtual worlds. Boellstorff points out that people in *Second Life* often refer to ‘real life,’ ‘first life,’ ‘the physical world,’ or ‘the real world.’ However, he argues that “such terms are imprecise antonyms for ‘virtual world’ because they imply that technology makes life less real” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 20).

In the case of deciding which phrase should be used to describe an online world, such as the environment or space of *Second Life*, ‘virtual world(s)’ is the least inconvenient term. In order to avoid confusion, I use the term ‘virtual world’ consistently throughout my dissertation, although Boellstorff prefers to use various synonyms, such as ‘virtual,’ ‘cyber,’ and ‘online’ (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 17). With regard to the issue of identity nomenclature, the following four terms are used in this paper: subject(s), people, resident(s), and avatar(s). Although these terms all refer to the identity who is on the keyboard, they perform different roles. The term ‘subject’ refers to human identity in a very general sense, across both sets of communities and spaces. ‘People’ is also a general term, but with a more specific orientation: it refers to subjects in actual world situations, such as when making the claim that ‘people are not able to swap their gender’ in the actual world. In the case of resident(s), whenever this term appears, it always refers to registered member(s) of *Second Life*. For example in the expression ‘most residents enjoy conducting sexual activities in *Second Life*’, the term ‘residents’ refers to all members of *Second Life*. In the case of the term ‘avatar(s)’, it designates the form of representation adopted by and standing in for each resident.

Defining the Virtual

To some extent forms of virtuality have always characterized human culture (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 33). McLuhan points out, for instance, “the development of writing can also be seen as the technology making virtual worlds possible” (McLuhan, 1962). Ong (1982) connects the idea of writing with Plato’s argument that writing is a thing, a product that has been modified in mind; it is a piece of artificial modification. Rheingold (2000, p. xv) and Sterling (1992, p. 108) both suggest that role-playing games and video games are ancestors of virtual worlds. Bartle also argues that “virtual worlds originate above all from video games” (Bartle, 2004, p. 4). Online games, especially role-playing games, provide opportunities for the players to take on and perform various identities. As in the virtual world, players in role-play games do not have to worry about the consequences of their actions. In this respect, *Second Life* was influenced by role-playing games.

Scholars have provided various definitions of virtual communities, worlds and environment based on their experiences, disciplines, and perspective. Schroeder defines virtual environment as “a computer-generated display that allows or compels the user (or users) to have a sense of being present in an environment other than the one they are actually in, and to interact with that environment” (Schroeder, 2008, p. 2). Boellstorff defines virtual worlds as having three fundamental characteristics: “(1) places, (2) inhabited by persons, and (3) enabled by online technologies” (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 17). For Boellstorff, virtual worlds cannot be established without all of these characteristics. ‘Places’ can be understood as environments, or platforms. ‘Inhabited’ means that virtual world activities are operated and negotiated by people. Even though some subjects participate in *Second Life* using an identity in the form of an animal avatar, it is a person who utilizes and is behind that avatar. Finally, virtual worlds such as video games or virtual communities must be connected to the Internet, so that many users can play and communicate at the same time without the restrictions of geography. I argue that subjectivity and identity are socially and culturally constructed no matter whether these two theoretical terms are applied to the actual or virtual worlds. Shapiro stresses that when subjects move to virtual worlds people have tended to create something that reflects:

Social body norms and hegemonically valued existing gender, race, and class scripts. Given the chance to truly choose to be anything,

Are we real in Virtual Worlds?

people usually bowed to the established social scripts and produced socially desirable bodies and identities – and in the process collectively created a world that reproduced the inequalities present in real-life society (Shapiro, 2010, p. 119).

However, the world of *Second Life* provides its residents with a place and an identity potentially very different from the actual world. As Hu, Zhao and Huang point out:

In the online world such as social network communities, however, the constraints on constructing one's identity are not in place because the corporeal body is separated from the interactions over the Internet. In particular, the text-mode interactions in social network communities propose nothing about one's physical characteristics (Hu, Zhao & Huang, 2015, P. 466).

If certain categories of people are unacceptable to the actual world or society; if gender identity is always an unsolved problem; if the criteria defining what makes someone a human are discriminatory, then in all these cases *Second Life* constitutes an alternative. What is distinctive about virtual worlds such as *Second Life*? Boellstorff contends that there are three assumptions that can be made:

The first is that virtual worlds do not exist as such, because the things termed 'virtual worlds' are too varied to be grouped together. A second assumption ... is that virtual worlds are composed solely of subcultures and it is not possible to generalize at the level of a virtual world. ... A third assumption ... is that the division between virtual and actual is unsustainable because so much of what takes place in virtual worlds draws from the actual world (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 27).

Scholars have considered and discussed whether or not virtual worlds can be thought of as places. According to Rutter and Smith, "'place' and 'virtual' cannot coexist: there is not 'place' in the virtual beyond the metaphor" (Rutter & Smith, 2005, p. 85). However Boellstorff argues that:

Virtual worlds are places ... they can be field sites ... Virtual worlds are not the latest example of globalization making place irrelevant; globalization makes place relevant in new ways, and what makes virtual worlds so revolutionary is that they are new kinds of places (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 91).

People who participate in virtual worlds such as *Second Life* are now offered 3D environments that simulate the actual world. It brings as much sensory experience to the users as from the actual world. This 'simulation of the actual' constitutes the basis of social relations. As Cosgrove points out:

In the dominant Western tradition, vision and place are linked through the idea of the landscape, which represents a way of seeing — a way in which some Europeans have represented to themselves and to others the world about them and their relationship with it, and through which they have commented on social relations (Cosgrove, 1998, p. 1).

Healy (1997) argues that virtual worlds such as *Second Life* are places, because even a simulated place is made meaningful as a place by an observer who sees by and through socio-cultural frames (and limitations). A 3D environment provides users with an actual world experience: as it is a simulation of the actual world, the meanings given to a place through seeing and observing effectively 'make that place'. However there are not the same kinds of temporal or geographical limitations in *Second Life* as there are in the actual world: residents can visit their friends in San Francisco in the early morning, then have dinner with their mother in Beijing.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, your virtual life experience can begin with saying hello by typing words onto the screen and waiting for answers. You may get responses from a number of residents within a minute. You can go shopping for new clothes for your avatar or a costume party. In this way, our actual world and physical identities are transported and integrated into the virtual world.

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Are we real in Virtual Worlds?

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