

Virtual Existentialism

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Meaning and Subjectivity in Virtual Worlds

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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 gameworlds 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.

Given this book's investment in technologically mediated experiences, we feel it is necessary to say a few words about the meaning we attribute to technology. We understand 'technology' as a conglomeration of artefacts and forms of knowledge that are employed in the pursuit of something. We find this purpose-oriented interpretation of our relationships with technologies (both as creators and as users) to be useful as a working definition and as a quick reference. In its brevity, however, it is reductive to the point of being misleading: the glossary definition we provide at the end of this introduction does not account, among other aspects, for how technologies are also always involved in wider and less predictable transformative processes. These unanticipated effects foster changes in human beings both at the individual level and as a society that are less obvious and usually slower than those for which that particular technology was originally intended. We could, for example, effortlessly grasp how mobile phones would facilitate communication among people. Before their ubiquitous presence in our daily routine, however, it was arguably less intuitive to envisage how using mobile phones would not only, for example, change the ways in which we interact with our friends, but also our very understanding of what friendship is. A more nuanced account of our relationships with technologies is captured in our glossary definition of 'multistability' as a defining quality of every technological artefacts.

The ambiguous, transformative, and often unforeseen long-term effects of technologies are not recent discoveries: they have been recorded and theorized by philosophers and cultural historians for centuries. Discussions over how our technical extensions affect the way people think and act are, in fact, as old as (written) philosophy. In his *Phaedrus* and *The Seventh Letter*, Plato famously expresses his concerns about how writing (a freshly introduced alpha-technology) would irrevocably transform ancient Greek society (Plato 1995; Levison et al. 1968).

In the present day and age, the ways in which various technologies contribute to reframing and altering social values and processes remain focal interests of academic fields such as the philosophy of technology and science and technology studies (see Verbeek 2005; Feenberg 2005; Bijker et al. 2012). Accordingly, the majority of existing academic work on virtual worlds concentrates its attention on how those technologies in particular affect us cognitively and psychologically, and on ways to harness those effects for purposes that are considered beneficial and socially acceptable (such as education, entertainment, and well-being). This focus on the transformative effects of experiences of virtual worlds at the socio-cultural

scale typically ignores what those experiences can mean for the individual. The personal, existential significance of traversing, manipulating, and even creating virtual environments has been, to this day, largely ignored by academia. There are, of course, remarkable exceptions to this claim, for instance in the scholarly fields of cyberpsychology and existential ludology, both of which will be discussed in this book.

By drawing on the philosophical traditions of existentialism and—to a lesser extent—phenomenology, our book aspires to address the academic blind-spot outlined in the previous paragraph. In this pursuit, *Virtual Existentialism* articulates several perspectives from which virtual worlds can be understood as existentially (and even evolutionarily) relevant. To borrow the words of Dreyfus and Spinoza, we aim to show that “by means of our equipment and coordinated practices, we human beings open coherent, distinct contexts or worlds in which we perceive, feel, act, and think” (Dreyfus and Spinoza 2003, 339). More specifically, we claim that, in virtual worlds, human beings can reflect on their values and beliefs, take on new subjectivities, explore previously unexperienced ways of being, and take reflective stances towards their existence and their subjectivity in the actual world.

Given our focus on existentialism, it is worth pointing out two caveats regarding the fundamental assumptions of this philosophical outlook. Firstly, it is important to observe that, in its traditional forms, existential philosophy rests upon a unitary idea of the individual human subject. Secondly, the existential perspective is one that foregrounds the concerns of the individual consciousness, relegating social matters to being, at best, inconvenient distractions and, at worst, active threats to the freedom of one’s private interiority. To give an example, writing about Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, one of the major works of the existentialist canon, Iris Murdoch describes it as articulating “the psychology of the lonely individual”, presenting an “egocentric and nonsocial world” in which the highest virtue is that of “a life devoted to purely private ends” (1953, 51–52). Needless to say, such a perspective not only sidelines the crucial, communal aspects of human life, but also entrenches an evident privilege: the freedom of existential self-determination is only available to those with the right material and socio-cultural conditions. For the purposes of this book, it is pertinent to note that this privilege is reflected in the conditions of access to virtual world experience. Virtual worlds and virtual subjectivities are only available to the small percentage of the global population who have access to the necessary hardware, have acquired the

required technological literacy to operate such hardware, and have the leisure time to engage in such experiences.

With regard to the first caveat, by focusing on how virtual world experience complicates the idea of the subject, *Virtual Existentialism* offers a fresh perspective on a number of long-standing questions in the field. Concerning the second observation, instead, we want to emphasize that the individual, existential dimension of our relationship with virtual worlds is not meant in an exclusive sense. We are not arguing, in other words, that experiences and transformations that affect individual human beings can be separated from (or understood apart from) their participation in society. Nor can these experiences be understood outside the context of those individuals' belonging to the human species. In that respect, we want to direct the attention of the reader onto the biological and anthropological ways to approach human existence that are discussed, in particular, in Chaps. 3 and 4.

In pursuing an existential understanding of virtual worlds, we initially introduce and elaborate upon the idea of 'virtual subjectivity' in Chap. 1, and then by examining the mechanisms by which the user is able to transition into and out of a virtual subjectivity in Chap. 2. Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 extend and apply the foundational existential notions presented in earlier chapters by building upon the work of four philosophers: respectively, Helmuth Plessner, Peter W. Zapffe, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Eugen Fink. A component of the work of each thinker is repurposed, in their respective chapters, as conceptual tools to reveal how virtual worlds are already understood and employed in ways that are constitutive to how we understand our existence and attribute meaning to it. Our appropriation of the notions and frameworks of those four thinkers also casts light on virtual environments as technologies that can be useful in reframing philosophical questions concerning subjectivity, self-determination, and finitude.

Next to the philosophical tradition of existentialism and phenomenology, the academic field of digital game studies constitutes an important source of material and inspiration for this book. Given the kinship with game studies, and the fact that digital games are frequently invoked as examples in this book, it might be important to clarify in this introduction that we do not intend to portray gameworlds as exceptional instances of virtual worlds. We do not consider them as being qualitatively different from experiences that emerge from engaging with other computer applications that give rise to world-like experiences, such as training simulations or interactive reconstructions of archaeological sites. We believe,

however, that the variety and the social diffusion of digital games make them particularly accessible for our readers and particularly convenient (for us and, we hope, for our readers) to analyse and reference.¹

What follows is the customary list of chapters together with a summary of the respective contents:

Chapter 1: Virtual Subjectivities and the Existential Significance of Virtual Worlds

This chapter introduces the notion of ‘virtual subjectivity’, which is defined as the subjective sense of ‘self’ that relates to one’s being-in-the-virtual-world. In particular, we propose an understanding of virtual subjectivity as standing in a nested relation to the individual’s subjectivity in the actual world and argue that it is this relation that allows virtual world experience to gain existential significance. The foundational notions of virtual subjectivity and virtual projectuality (the kind of subject that the individual aspires to be) pave the way for understanding the transformative, self-transformative, and therapeutic possibilities disclosed by virtual worlds in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2: En-roling and De-roling in Virtual Worlds

In light of the idea of virtual subjectivity discussed in the previous chapter, Chap. 4 focuses on two aspects of our being in virtual environments: ‘en-roling’ and ‘de-roling’. The first refers to those practices, experiences, and activities by which the virtual world user is led to form an understanding of—and to internalize—a particular subjectivity in relation to the virtual world. The second indicates techniques through which subjects ‘disrobe’ themselves of their role in the virtual environment. This chapter draws comparisons between engaging with virtual worlds and a range of other cultural practices—including dramatherapy and psychodrama, liminal rites, and live-action role-playing—and the mechanisms of transition between subjectivities used in these practices.

Chapter 3: Helmuth Plessner and Virtual Worlds as Existential Complements

Chapter 3 introduces the second part of this book—four chapters, each of which engage with the thought of a different philosophical figure, applying their ideas to our considerations of the virtual. This chapter frames human existence as inherently lacking a reliable grounding on which to anchor values and meaning. Extending the work of Helmuth Plessner, we

focus on technologies in general—and virtual worlds in particular—as existential tools through which human beings strive to come to terms with the uncertainty and incompleteness that characterize their existence.

Chapter 4: Peter W. Zapffe and the Virtual Tragic

Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer Peter W. Zapffe understands human life as inherently meaningless. In relation to that meaninglessness, he identifies four ways in which human beings typically protect themselves from the existential panic that accompanies the awareness of that meaninglessness—*isolation, anchoring, distraction, and sublimation*. In this chapter, we use Zapffe’s four categories to examine virtual environments as technologies for repressing existential panic.

Chapter 5: Jean-Paul Sartre and Escaping from Being-in-the-World

This chapter approaches our experience of virtual worlds through Jean-Paul Sartre’s phenomenology of the imagination. It looks at Sartre’s argument that the existential significance of the imagination lies in its giving us the capacity to surpass our being-in-the-world. On this basis, the chapter draws a line between virtual subjectivity and how Sartre’s frames the concept of imaginary consciousness, considering how our relationships with virtual environments both reflect the phenomenological structure Sartre attributes to the imagination and puts it into question.

Chapter 6: Eugen Fink and Existential Play

The particular way in which German phenomenologist Eugen Fink understands ‘play’ is deeply involved with fundamental existential concerns such as the question of freedom. Relying on the existential significance Fink grants to play—specifically, the capacity play grants us to explore unactualized dimensions of our being—this chapter offers a perspective on the relationships between one’s actual self and one’s roles in virtual environments.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

This concluding chapter articulates a summary of the central themes and the main claims of the book. While doing so, it invites readers to focus their attention on the ‘fluidifying sway’ of virtual environments, that is to say on the specific ways how virtual world experiences reveal—and grant interactive access to—multiple and possible courses of action that are

latent in any given situation. By experientially disclosing several alternatives to a certain *status quo* through repeated interactions, do-overs, and time reversals, virtual worlds inherently encourage their users to embrace ‘what could be’ over ‘what is’. This chapter approaches our relationships with virtual environments in ways that are not solely concerned with their socially desirable uses and effects, but also identifies aspects of those experiences that constitute a menace to our well-being and survival.

As a consequence of having largely grounded our insights in existential philosophy, many of the technical terms that are used in this book are either directly borrowed from existentialism or can be understood as extensions and elaborations of notions originally developed within that philosophical tradition. This might pose some initial difficulties for readers who are not trained in philosophy. In light of this potential hurdle, we have decided to provide (below) a quick and accessible glossary of key terms that will frequently recur in *Virtual Existentialism*.

In the glossary, the meanings of words such as ‘existence’, ‘freedom’, ‘situation’, and ‘subjectivity’ are outlined in ways that are either directly derived from, or closely inspired by, existential literature. Existentialism is, however, not the only lens through which we decided to observe the effects of our interactive experiences with (and within) virtual environments. Some of the technical terms used in the book are, instead, understood in accordance with philosophical currents like phenomenology and post-phenomenology (as is the case for words like ‘multistability’ or ‘world’), while others will testify a closer affinity with perspectives offered in the scholarly field of virtual worlds research (which is particularly evident in the case of terms like ‘virtuality’ or ‘actuality’) and digital game studies.

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A screenshot of Pippin Barr’s 2011 digital game *Let’s Play: Ancient Greek Punishment*

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Actuality: The adjective ‘actual’ is used to indicate that some things or events are currently the case in the world that we natively inhabit as biological creatures. The indexical specification ‘actual’ (e.g. in the case of the ‘actual world’ or one’s ‘actual body’) clarifies that we are not referring to worlds or bodies that exist virtually (see the definition for ‘virtuality’).

Existence: We adopt the idea—articulated in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1962)—that to exist is to be-in-a-world as one concrete being among other beings in (and for) that particular world. This definition holds regardless of whether we are referring to the actual world or to a virtual world. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Jean-Paul Sartre contends that existence precedes essence (2007): the simple fact of

being-in-the-world is the foundational and primary condition of human being. It is only through finding ourselves in the world, and becoming conscious of our own being-in-the-world, that we can attribute (or fail to attribute) meaning to it.

Existential meaning: With ‘existential meaning’ we indicate the (inevitably subjective) significance attributed to the set of things, activities, people, and values in a world that a subject cares about and that contribute to make one’s existence in that world preferable to non-existence.

Freedom: In the context of this book, we do not understand ‘freedom’ as state of absence of (or liberation from) limitations and interdictions, as was the case of the modern interpretation of the notion of ‘autonomy’. Instead, we use it to indicate the possibilities for self-fashioning and self-determination that emerge in relation to the limitations and interdictions that characterize being in a certain world.

Game: In presenting what we understand by ‘game’, we follow Ludwig Wittgenstein’s argument according to which any comprehensive definition of ‘game’ is bound to fail at capturing the heterogeneity of the family of practices to which the term has been applied (2009, 37; see also Calleja and Aarseth 2015). In the context of this book, we use the word ‘game’ to indicate a software package that discloses a virtual environment intended to be engaged with primarily for entertainment purposes. As we are concentrating our attention on virtual environments, the word ‘game’ functions in this book as a synonym for commonly accepted terms such as ‘videogame’, ‘digital game’, or ‘computer game’.

Multistability: This term indicates the inherent possibility of every technology to be repurposed and used in unanticipated ways. The quality of being multistable is what makes it possible for a technology to acquire new meanings, functions, and effects within a social context. Our interactions with technologies are thus recognized as not solely determined by the original developers of a technology, but in an ambiguous and dynamic relation with their users. The term ‘multistability’ was first introduced by Don Ihde in his 1990 book *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth*.

Role: A ‘role’ is here understood as a specific and recognizable configuration of an individual’s being-in-the-world. A role is something we ‘take on’, and, as such, there is always a distance between the individual’s

self-perception (what they see as their actual self) and the role. At the same time, since one is oneself when playing the role, the activity of adopting and exploring a particular mode of being-in-the-world that pertains to a particular role might have resonances with, or prove transformative of, one's self-conception. As Robert J. Landy writes, taking on a role involves "being oneself and not oneself at the same time" (1993, 48).

Situation: The term 'situation' is used in the way it is presented in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1966). It refers to the total, contingent, and undeniable set of facts one finds oneself 'thrown into'—one's socio-technical environment, cultural background, ethnicity, and so on. A situation is equally the product of the facts of the world and of the individual subject's freedom to make of those facts what they will (*ibid.*, 627). Put differently, a situation is a world, understood as the ground for a subject's existence.

Subjectivity: A subjectivity is a consciousness that occupies a particular standpoint towards a certain experiential domain. From its specific perspective, a subjectivity frames that domain as a world (see the definition for 'world'). In other words, a subject participates in a world and conscious of it and of their particular standpoint within it. In relation to the notion of 'situation' presented in this glossary, a subjectivity is a consciousness for whom a world—actual or virtual—is taken up as the ground for their existential project.

Technology: A technology is understood as a conglomeration of artefacts and forms of knowledge that are employed in the pursuit of something. This extremely broad definition includes the specific economic interests, societal norms, and values that influenced the development and the uses of a particular technology (see De Mul 2010, 39). It is crucial to clarify here that the comprehensive and pursuit-oriented understanding of technology we adopt does not exclude the fact that technologies also disclose new social meanings and functions in ways that are not originally intended or anticipated by their creators (see the definition for 'multistability'). In this sense, we argue that technology cannot be understood in a merely instrumental fashion, but needs to be embraced as a characteristic way of how human beings are in the world, a way that is created by humans and—in turn—is constitutive of humans.²

Virtuality: The notion of virtuality has been approached and interpreted in a number of different ways in several socio-technical contexts.³ In this book, we utilize the adjective ‘virtual’ as referring to something that can be interactively experienced within computer-generated environments (see the definition for ‘virtual environment’).

Virtual environment: A virtual environment is a particular kind of digital artefact (see ‘virtuality’). Virtual environments like the operating theatre of a surgical simulation or a text editor are defined by their possibility to be experientially engaged by its users as worlds (see ‘world’). What we are trying to highlight, here, is that an environment is a particular kind of object, whereas a world is a particular kind of relationship. To clarify with an example: a level in a digital game is a virtual environment, and it is our interacting with it that makes it emerge in our experience as a virtual world.

Virtual world: In accordance with the definition of ‘world’ provided in this glossary, we understand a ‘virtual world’ as the (relatively) perceptually stable interactive experience that is disclosed by a computer-generated environment (see the definition for ‘virtuality’). This interpretation allows us to establish a distinction between virtual world experiences and those of dreams and hallucinations (Gualeni 2015, 22). Virtual worlds can be recognized as worlds precisely because they can be accessed, experienced, and returned to at will and can be experienced in ways that are persistently intelligible in their mechanical and aesthetic aspects (*ibid.*).

World: In the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, the term ‘world’ generally indicates two interrelated things. First, a ‘world’ is a set composed of beings that are understood together with all their properties and mutual relationships. More specifically, a ‘world’ describes that set as experienced by one of the beings involved in it. To be identified as a world, those properties and mutual relationships need to be experienced in ways that are persistently perceivable and behaviourally consistent for the being in question (Gualeni 2015, 6). Relatedly, in its second meaning, a ‘world’ indicates the horizon (or ground) against which every object is experienced and understood.

NOTES

1. It might be worth mentioning that when academically referencing digital games, we decided to align with the guidelines proposed by Gualeni, Fassone, and Linderoth in their 2019 paper ‘How to Reference Digital Games’. Their recommendations are mindful of the specific and specifically unstable qualities of the medium in question and address various bibliographic tensions and lacks that characterize the ways in which digital games are currently referenced in academia.
2. As outlined, technology is understood in this book as something (material or immaterial) of which human subjects are both the creators and the products of. With this approach, however, we do not mean to claim that technology should be exclusively understood as a human affair. The idea that only human beings can create, use, or be affected by technologies would be a ridiculous one to entertain, as there are several examples of animal species capable of producing purpose-oriented artefacts, and as it is obvious that human technologies have effects that are not exclusive to the lives of human animals. What we intend to clarify with this endnote is that the anthropocentrism of *Virtual Existentialism* is not an ideological belief of ours, but a functional decision for this scholarly project. For better or worse, our book has a limited scope and is deliberately meant as a specifically humanistic kind of inquiry into human existence, human technologies, and the mutual relationships thereof.
3. The adjective ‘virtual’ was originally used to encapsulate the idea of ‘potentiality’. More specifically, *Virtualis* is a late-medieval neologism the existence of which became necessary when Aristotle’s concept of δύναιμις (*dynamis*: potentiality, power) had to be translated into Latin (van Binsbergen 1997, 9). The concept of ‘potentiality’ lying at the etymological foundation of ‘virtual’ provides the background for understanding why, at least in one of its interpretations, it is used to indicate the latency of certain possibilities inherent in a specific artefact, combination of artefacts, or state of things (Gualeni 2015, 54–55). ‘Virtual’ as an adjective can also be attributed to things that we can consider practically actual, but not formally so. It is from that standpoint that Philip Brey highlighted the fact that among the pre-digital connotations of ‘virtual’ we can also list ‘imaginary’, ‘make-believe’, and ‘fake’. In this sense, ‘virtual’ is still used as an antonym for words like ‘real’, ‘actual’, and ‘physical’ (Brey 2008). A widely adopted connotation of the adjective ‘virtual’ was presented by Pierre Lévy, for whom ‘virtual’ is not to be understood in opposition to ‘actual’ in the sense that something ‘is currently the case’, but to ‘actual’ as having the quality of existing in the world humans are native to (Lévy 1998, 14). This last understanding of ‘virtual’ is consistent with a digitalist approach to virtual reality such as the one proposed by David J. Chalmers (2017) and resonates with the one adopted by this book.

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