

Virtual Subjectivity: Existence and Projectuality in Virtual Worlds

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Abstract: This paper draws on the notion of the ‘project,’ as developed in the existential philosophy of Heidegger and Sartre, to articulate an understanding of the existential structure of engagement with virtual worlds. By this philosophical understanding, the individual’s orientation towards a project structures a mechanism of self-determination, meaning that the project is understood essentially as the project to make oneself into a certain kind of being. Drawing on existing research from an existential-philosophical perspective on subjectivity in digital game environments, the notion of a ‘virtual subjectivity’ is proposed to refer to the subjective sense of being-in-the-virtual-world. The paper proposes an understanding of virtual subjectivity as standing in a *nested* relation to the individual’s subjectivity in the actual world, and argues that it is this relation that allows virtual world experience to gain significance in the light of the individual’s projectual existence. The arguments advanced in this paper pave the way for a comprehensive understanding of the transformative, self-transformative, and therapeutic possibilities and advantages afforded by virtual worlds.

1 – INTRODUCTION

In existential philosophy – and particularly in the work of Martin Heidegger (1962) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1966) – the notion of the *project* is granted central importance. In Sartre’s perspective, one’s being is framed by one’s orientation towards the achievement of an overarching existential project, which, in very broad terms, could be defined as the aspiration to determine the shape of one’s individual existence. It is in this projectual disposition that things become meaningful to the individual; where they can feature as obstacles to the project, as equipment that can be employed towards its achievement, as sub-goals that contribute or partake to its greater objective, and so on. With this paper, we claim that the notion of the existential project sheds light both on the existential structure of experience in virtual worlds, and on virtual world experience itself as an existential practice.

Before we venture into the implications and complications of our claim, it is important to clarify what we mean when we attribute the quality of being ‘virtual’ to an event or thing. Among the various possible interpretations of what it means for something to be ‘virtual,’ we understand the adjective as referring to something that can be interactively experienced in computer-generated environments.¹ In accordance to this interpretation, a ‘virtual world’ is the (relatively) perceptually stable experiential horizon disclosed by a digital environment.²

Our exploration of our relationships with virtual worlds through the lens of projectuality shall be structured around two key questions. The first concerns the projectual structure of the individual’s being in a virtual context: *how does an existential project give shape to the individual’s being in the virtual world?* (Sections 3 and 4) The second question, then, focuses on the relation between the

individual's being in the virtual world and the existential project that shapes her life as a whole: *in what way(s) does the practice of taking on a virtual project figure in the overarching project of an individual's being?* (Section 5 and 6).

As a theoretical foundation upon which to tackle these questions, we introduce the notion of projectuality, particularly as it is developed in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (Section 2). Referring to the authors' experiences of digital game worlds as paradigmatic examples of virtual experiences, we will then argue that the player's being in the virtual world disclosed by the game is understood as a 'ludic subjectivity' that emerges in response to the situation established by the game (Vella 2015). This ludic subjectivity can be understood as being analogous to our subjective existence in the non-virtual world. On this basis, we will consider the ways in which projectuality – and, in a wider sense, the individual's existence in a world – is complicated in the case of virtual worlds, where one's subjectivity can be understood both as an extension of the individual's existential situation and project and as a distinct, nested, virtual subjective standpoint and existential situation in its own right. Linking ideas from existential philosophy (Plessner 1982; Fink 2015b) and virtuality research (Hansen 2003; Compagno 2008; Gualeni 2015), we will work towards the claim that the existential significance of virtual world experience lies in its capacity to disclose to the user possibilities of her being in excess of her actual situation.

2 – EXISTENTIALISM AND THE NOTION OF THE PROJECT

In existential philosophy, and particularly in the writing of Sartre (1966), the project is considered to be of fundamental importance to one's being-in-the-world, and as an organizing principle that gives form and directionality to one's subjectivity. Existential philosophy postulates that, as individual human beings, our being is determined by what Heidegger termed a 'thrownness' (*Geworfenheit*) into the world (2008, 174): we find ourselves thrown into a world that forms around our subjective standpoint a contingent set of facts – a *facticity* – against which we understand and develop our existence. This facticity thus forms the basis for what Sartre terms our existential *situation*³ (1966, 127).

Sartre, in his philosophy of selfhood, however, establishes a distinction between one's situated existence and a more essential selfhood (ibid., 147). One can take stock of the facts that influence one's existence - that one lives in a certain country, that there are certain pursuits one enjoys, and so on – but one is always conscious that one is not fully determined by these contingent facts. One's selfhood transcends the contingent set of facts that is true about oneself in one's present situation. For Sartre, this potentiality is human freedom: pre-reflective, and utterly spontaneous. One might presently be employed as a university professor, but, since this is simply a contingent, external fact, it does not define who one is wilfully and completely. One is always free to make something else of oneself. To think otherwise (to convince oneself that one simply *is* a university professor), would be to live in what Sartre terms *bad faith*: a wilful denial of one's freedom (ibid., 87).

The consequence of this radical freedom, Sartre continues, is that at the core of our being we find only *nothingness* - for we could bracket every external, contingent fact about ourselves, going as far as leaving us with a complete lack of definition. In the face of this impossibility to find any essential ground for one's individual existence – that is, any ready-made, given determination of *what* one's being is – the desire emerges to make of oneself a clear and distinct self, and thereby to become, through free self-determination, a particular kind of being. For this reason, according to Sartre, human

existence is shaped by what he terms a *fundamental* or *original project* (ibid., 717). He describes this as a “project of being” (ibid., 722), meaning that it is ultimately “that which lies at the core of any person.” (Barbone 1994, 191) Of course, by definition, a projectual structure to human being means that human being is *always* projectual: that is, that there is no end point at which the individual can rest in the achievement of the desired self-determination.

It is perhaps relevant to clarify that, in this paper, we do not necessarily subscribe to the rigidly univocal quality that Sartre attributes to the original project. Rather, we embrace a wider and more flexible understanding of human existence as always oriented towards future possibilities. The term used by Heidegger to indicate this projectual disposition (*Entworfenheit*) perhaps better captures the quality of being ‘thrown ahead’ of one’s present situation (Heidegger 1962, 184, 185). We will, however, retain Sartre’s observation that what this projectual orientation has in view is not the achievement of the future possibility in its own right, but rather the quality of being ‘thrown ahead’ of oneself towards the being one is striving to be.

3 – SUBJECTIVITY IN DIGITAL GAMES

According to existential philosophy, in our everyday existence we find ourselves thrown into a certain existential situation, in relation to which we form the project to be a certain kind of being. In a similar way, we argue, when engaging with a digital environment, the user finds herself ‘thrown’ into a virtual situation. This perspective implies two things. First, it implies that the digital environment is absorbed into the user’s consciousness as an existential situation, and, hence, comes to be perceived as a meaningful ‘world’ (see endnote 2). Second, in order to experience a digital environment as such – as a world in which she can plan, act, and pursue a project – the user must be situated as a subject in relation to this world. The adoption of a virtual world into consciousness is cognitively, psychologically, and existentially dependent upon the user investing herself into a subjectivity that takes that virtual world as its ‘situation.’

To date, the field within which most theoretical investigation has been performed into the question of subjectivity and existentialism in digital environments is that of digital game studies. Broadly speaking, the argument has been made that players’ experience of digital game worlds functions according to phenomenological structures that are analogous to those by which we experience the world as embodied subjects. From this perspective, the player’s subjectivity in the gameworld has largely been understood as pivoting on the player’s embodiment in the figure of the avatar (Taylor 2002; Grodal 2003; Klevjer 2006; 2012; Bayliss 2007a; 2007b; Gregersen and Grodal 2008; Gee 2008).⁴ Just as tied to the notion of embodiment is Ulf Wilhelmsson’s concept of the ‘Game Ego,’ a “bodily based function that enacts a point of being within the game environment through a tactile motor/kinaesthetic link” (2008, 61). Finally, the idea that the avatar upholds a concrete standpoint for the player within the gameworld has also been formalized by Gordon Calleja into the concept of incorporation (2011, 169).

In our assessment, the theoretical developments that have most explicitly and thoroughly sought to reach an understanding of the existential dimension of in-game subjectivity are the idea of the ‘gameplay condition’ (Leino 2010), that of ‘ludic subjectivity’ (Vella 2015), and that of the ‘gameplay situation’ (Kania 2017). As such, we consider it worth providing a brief overview of these concepts in order to anchor our understanding of the existential character of the player’s in-game subjectivity.

Olli Tapio Leino defines the gameplay condition (2009, 12; 2010, 101) as the condition of responsibility for one's freedom of action resulting from the game's material upholding of the consequences of the player's choices. Drawing on the notion of facticity that we have discussed above, Leino understands a game as an 'extended facticity' for the player (2010, 220). Subjectively adopting a standpoint in relation to this facticity, the player subjects herself to the gameplay condition, developing a subjective existence in response to the material encounter with the game object against which her freedom is measured.

The idea of a subjective existence in relation to the game is further developed in Daniel Vella's theory of ludic subjectivity, "the subjective 'I-in-the-gameworld' the player crystallizes through engaging with the gameworld by means of the playable figure" (2015, 22). By this understanding, ludic subjectivity is the existence the player enacts by acting towards the gameworld from the standpoint of the ludic subject-position, "the perceptual standpoint the playable figure establishes for the player in relation to the gameworld" (ibid., 21). This subjective standpoint towards the gameworld is structured through a number of interlinked formal mechanisms, all related to the player's embodiment in the playable figure: the establishment of a spatial 'here' for the player and the related establishment of visual and auditory standpoints, the adoption of the playable figure's capabilities for (and limitations on) action in the gameworld, the orientation of these capabilities towards set goals, and the playable figure's vulnerability to being acted upon by the gameworld (ibid., 266-89). All of these unite to determine the player's comportment in the gameworld, and, hence, the shape of the subjective being she enacts. The ludic subject, then, is not a pre-existing character that the player finds ready-made and simply steps into (though it can be, and often is, tied to a scripted diegetic character). Rather, the ludic subject refers to the playing individual's sense of her own transposed, subjective existence in the gameworld. As such, the ludic subject is composed of the set of player's subjective experiences of engaging with the gameworld from the standpoint of the ludic subject-position, and is only brought into being by the player's playing.

Along similar lines, Marta Matylda Kania articulates the interrelated notions of the *self-avatar* and the *gameplay situation* to conceptualize the player's existential 'situatedness' in the gameworld. She defines the former as "an emergent being situated within the gameworld, consisting of the player's existence and intentional acts, and the features of the avatar" (2017, 7), and the latter as the "perceptual position of the self-avatar towards the gameworld." (ibid., 61) The intertwining of the two concepts becomes apparent in the understanding of "the self-avatar as a subjective position that enables cognition of the particular gameworld from the point of view of the gameplay situation" (ibid., 57).

In closely related ways, the concepts of the gameplay condition, ludic subjectivity, and the gameplay situation formulate an understanding of the player's subjective existence towards the gameworld. All advance a position according to which the digital game environment is understood as a facticity that the player adopts as the existential situation for a subjectivity she develops within the virtual world. Though these theoretical insights were developed in relation to player experience in (and of) digital game worlds, they contain little that is specific to ludic form or experience. What we are arguing here is that these insights can be fruitfully applied beyond the disciplinary boundaries of digital game studies. In particular, the conceptual model that allowed us to recognize a 'ludic subjectivity' could also, with very little modification, be used to capture the experiential and existential aspects of virtual worlds in general. We propose the term 'virtual subjectivity' to define this extended understanding of the subjectivity established for the user in relation to a digital environment, for which the digital environment becomes an existential situation.

4 – GOALS, PROJECTUALITY, AND VIRTUAL SUBJECTIVITY

In order to better understand virtual subjectivity, it is necessary to delve deeper into the insights advanced in the field of game studies concerning subjectivity in digital game worlds. In light of this paper's stated aim of exploring the projectual dimension of virtual subjectivity, we shall focus on game studies' investigation of goals as a key element in shaping the player's being-in-the-gameworld.

An orientation towards goals has long been recognized as a defining characteristic of games. This emphasis on teleology can be recognized in a number of definitions of 'game' whether in the specific form of the delineation of a game objective or through the notion of a preferred or disequilibrium outcome (Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971, 7; Suits 1990, 34; Costikyan 2002, 11-14; Juul 2005, 36). The existential implications of this goal-orientation – and its congruence to the notion of the project – becomes evident in Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical approach to play. Gadamer argues that "every game presents the man who plays with a task" (1989, 107), and to adopt the role of the player is to adopt the task as one's own. However, as with Sartre's notion of the fundamental project, the crux of the matter is not the achievement of the task. Instead, the player's adoption of this task as her own, and the orientation of her being towards the achievement of the task, shapes her being into a particular 'comportment' (ibid.) – which, again, maps quite closely to Sartre's assertion that the project represents the attempt to bring about the particular mode of being that is who the subject desires to be (1966, 724).

This insight of Gadamer's finds a reflection in the three existentially-motivated approaches to digital game subjectivity outlined above. In Vella's model of ludic subjectivity, *goal-orientation* is highlighted as one of the primary structures determining the player's subjective 'situatedness' towards the game world (2015, 283-86). As he writes, "the setting of goals towards which [the player's] efforts are directed [...] makes the gameworld appear to the player in the light of these goals." (ibid., 284) Likewise, Kania's notion of the gameplay situation is intimately tied to the pursuit of a goal – the gameplay situation is "experienced as purposeful from the internal perspective [to the gameworld] with relation to its goal" (2017, 62).

It might be objected that the game's setting of a goal to which the player must adhere, as long as she wishes to retain her status as a player at all, robs the situation of game play of the freedom that is necessary to Sartre's understanding of the project of being. We must keep in mind, here, that the existential project is one that is taken on freely and volitionally. This might lead us to conclude that – to introduce another Sartrean term – the player is in *bad faith*, that is subjecting herself to a mode of being that is given to her, and thus denying herself the freedom of self-determination. This is the conclusion Kania reaches (ibid., 100) – even if the phenomenological situation of digital game play allows the player to take a reflective distance towards her own gameplay situation, her being-in-the-virtual-world remains inevitably determined by the situation as long as she wishes to keep playing the game.

Leino, however, takes a different perspective. Drawing explicitly on the Sartrean notion of the project in theorizing the player's subjective engagement with digital game worlds, he argues that digital games "simultaneously facilitate and resist a particular (kind of) project, which makes the particular (kind of) project stand out among all possible (kinds of) projects"⁵ (2010, 135). By this understanding, the facticity of the game's digital materiality is what renders a particular project possible, but also, at the same time, what resists the achievement of that project, demanding active effort on the part of the player to overcome obstacles and oppositions. At the same time, he argues, the project or goal itself

cannot be located purely in the game's digital materiality and be simply limited by the game's conceptual and material boundaries - rather, as a function of the player's subjective engagement with the facticity of the game, it "*transcends* the game artefact" (ibid., 146) and represents a self-determination in relation to the facticity of the game artefact.

This becomes particularly apparent when we begin to account for the fact that digital games will, to varying degrees, allow the player the freedom to engage in actions and practices that do not follow a direct vector to the game's stated goals: for example, exploring the gameworld for its own sake in an open-world game such as *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED 2015),⁶ or jumping off the highest mountain in *Just Cause 2* (Avalanche Studios 2010) in order to use the parachute to glide the furthest possible distance (Vella 2015, 286). Pursuing the explicit goals set by the digital game, then, is only one of the possibilities of being that the player can pursue within the game's virtual world. Needless to say, this capacity for the user to freely choose her own virtual project is even more evident in virtual worlds – such as *Proteus* (Key & Kanaga 2013) and *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003) – that do not present her with explicitly stated goals towards which to orient her virtual subjectivity.

What these approaches to virtual subjectivity in digital game worlds share, then, is the idea that one's in-game subjectivity takes its shape in the light of the goals one pursues in the game world. To reiterate, though, it is not the achievement of the goal that matters. On the contrary, its status as an existential project lies in the fact that, as Gadamer writes about the task of play, the goal is only a pretext that serves to shape the player's comportment in the virtual world into a particular form, and, as such, to constitute a particular project of being in the virtual world.

5 - ACTUAL SUBJECTIVITY AND VIRTUAL SUBJECTIVITY

So far we have argued that, in engaging with digital environments, we step into a virtual subjectivity that, in phenomenological terms, organizes that digital milieu into a virtual world that serves as our existential situation. Furthermore, we have argued that, just as subjectivity takes its shape through the orientation towards an existential project, virtual subjectivity is likewise projectually determined through its orientation towards the user's goals in the digital environment.

However, we argue that an approach that merely considers an actual subjectivity in the actual world on the one hand, and an entirely separate virtual subjectivity in the virtual world on the other hand, is inadequate and potentially misleading. We argue that virtual subjectivities are fundamentally rooted in actual subjectivities, and that there is a definite hierarchy between the two. To advance this perspective, we will argue, in this section, that virtual worlds are experientially and existentially subordinate to the actual world, and that virtual experiences can be considered a subset of actual experience. This perspective will be articulated from a number of different standpoints, all of which reveal the existential structures that we can establish and develop in relation to virtual worlds are ultimately meaningful and valuable only to the extent to which they figure as meaningful and valuable in relation to their actual homologues. In the next section, we will also make the case that the existential significance of virtual subjectivity and virtual world experience lies precisely in its capacity to stand over and against what the individual considers to be her actual, situated subjective existence. As such, we bring into view the possibilities of her being beyond the contingency of her actual situation.

To begin with, there is a causal, mechanical connection between the world we index as actual - the one we are native to and share as biological creatures - and the virtual worlds that are technically created within it. From this perspective, virtual environments are recognized as technological artefacts that are designed, accessed, and interactively experienced on the basis of our *actual* capabilities to perceive, understand, and operate within them. This subordination is repeated in terms of their experiential and existential dimensions. In our lived experience, the actual world is the base-world to which we return upon pausing a digital game, upon completing our training session in a flight-simulator, or upon taking off our virtual-reality headset. Moreover, the way in which the digital medium interprets, stores, represents, and manipulates information also bears witness to a direct derivation of computational processes from the cognitive and biological ones on which they were modelled⁷ (Gualeni, 2015, 156, 157).

One of the answers provided by American philosopher Robert Nozick to the question of whether human beings would ever opt to be permanently plugged into a pleasurable virtual world corroborates our previous observations. Discussing his famous thought experiment regarding “the Experience Machine,” Nozick maintained that people who decide to permanently plug into an experience machine would knowingly bind themselves to perceptions, experiences, and future possibilities that can be rationalized and simulated technically (Nozick 1974). Nozick argued that, being aware of the limited and artificial nature of a virtual world, we would resist abandoning the one we are native to for a virtual one. The ontological and existential hierarchy between the actual world and the one simulated in “the Experience Machine” is so ingrained in Nozick’s thought that he went as far as considering a permanent connection to a virtual world to be “a kind of suicide” (*ibid.*, 43).

Nozick’s thought experiment is indicative in its devaluation of virtual world experience in comparison to the depth, freedom, and existential meaning that can be derived from actual world experience. The scenario he proposes in his thought experiment, however, bears little relation to how we actually experience virtual worlds. First of all, Nozick presupposes a complete cognitive, perceptual and psychological investment in the virtual world, to the exclusion of the actual world. Such an investment is, however, not an all-or-nothing deal: the experience of virtual worlds as we know it does not constitute an alternative to actual world experience. When stepping into a subjective standpoint in relation to a virtual world, we do not entirely leave behind our subjective existence towards the actual world. We do not stop being ourselves when we pick up a controller or put on a VR headset, any more than we stop being ourselves when we take the wheel of a car or sit down for a meal. Accordingly, where the digital environment allows it, the individual can bring the concerns of her own project into play, shaping her virtual subjectivity along the lines of her actual values - for instance, choosing to adopt a vegan lifestyle in digital games where the suggested ‘implied player’ (Aarseth 2007, 132) behaviour would be to fight and hunt animals instead (Westerlaken 2017). At the same time, given that a virtual subjectivity is perceived as being distinct from one’s actual subjectivity, it is certainly possible for it to be shaped by practices, goals and dispositions that would have no place in the individual’s actual subjectivity. These practices constitute a distinct ‘role’ the individual would need to step into, and out of, through more or less formalized mechanisms of role-taking and de-roling (Gualeni, Vella, and Harrington 2017). In either case, if we accept the definitorial framework of this paper, then the experience of engaging with a virtual world must itself be also recognized an actual world experience.

In light of the arguments presented, our current relationships with virtual worlds and our subjective existence within them, can be perhaps better understood as *nested* existential situations. With respect to the ludic subjectivities of digital game worlds, this is a point that has been observed by Vella in his

argument for a “double perspectival structure” of ludic engagement. According to this structure, the player simultaneously inhabits a subjective standpoint *internal* to the gameworld (the ludic, or virtual, subjectivity) and her own subjective standpoint as an individual *external* to the gameworld. Crucially, moreover, the internal perspective (and, hence, the virtual subjectivity) is itself experienced through the external perspective (Vella 2015, 55-71).

6 - VIRTUAL WORLD EXPERIENCE AS EXISTENTIAL PRACTICE

Having advanced the perspective that a virtual subjectivity is nested within the individual’s actual subjectivity, and thereby figures as a practice within the individual’s existential project, we are able to proceed to the second question this paper set out to tackle: *in what way(s) does the practice of taking on a virtual (or in-game) project figure in the overarching project of the playing individual’s actual being as a whole?* Our answer to this question will proceed from having posited a hierarchy between actual and virtual existential situations, and having recognized evident ideological and experiential relationships between the two.

To begin with, there are several functional, extrinsic reasons as to why one might want to take part in a virtual world - for example, utilizing training simulations with the aim of practicing a particular skill in scenarios it would be impractical, unethical, or impossible to recreate physically. Leaving aside these functional reasons as well as approaches to virtual environment (such as those attributing to virtual experiences values and effects that are limited to entertainment and/or escapism), we decided to explore why we are willing to invest psychologically and to dedicate time and resources to derivative worlds, that is to say pursuing experiences that are understood as having less significant existential importance compared to actual ones.

Drawing on the philosophical tradition of existentialism (outlined in the previous sections of this paper) and on various perspectives offered by philosophical anthropology, in the following paragraphs we propose an understanding of human being as fundamentally structured around an unfinished (and unfinishable) project. Arnold Gehlen, for instance, famously described man as a ‘deficient being,’ a creature that is characterized not by specific instincts and abilities, but by lacks and needs (*Mängelwesen*) (Gehlen 1988, 10). Accordingly, Helmuth Plessner’s *The Stages of the Organic and Man* presents technology as a constitutive part of culture that is inextricably linked to the fundamental incompleteness of the human being (Plessner 2006, 344).

Man [...] wants to compensate for the lack that constitutes his life form. [...] In this fundamental need or nakedness can be found the *movens* for everything that is specifically human, the focus on the *irrealis* and the use of artificial means, the ultimate foundation of the *technical artifact* and that which it serves: *culture*. (Plessner 2006, 334)

Plessner believed, as hinted in the quotation above, that it is the destiny of humanity to aspire to the transcendence of its original (natural) condition (Plessner 1982, IV, 385). In a way that is reminiscent of Novalis’s concept of the “*fantastik*,” Plessner’s “focus on the *irrealis*” reflects the innate and constant drive characterizing ‘lacking beings’ to complement and reshape themselves. The overt objective of this characteristic human propensity is specifically that of offering the individual

temporary freedom from the seriousness and the boundaries of one's own identity, physical capabilities, and perceptual, emotional, intellectual, critical, and contextual 'thrownness.'

On the basis of the 'incompleteness' of humans' existential project, we recognize human beings as beings who are attracted to practices in which they can exercise their freedom and their desire for self-fashioning. These practices include, among others, intellectual activities as well as religious and ludic ones. This fundamental human drive was more recently invoked by Mark Hansen, who defined the concept of 'virtuality' as "that capacity, so fundamental to human existence, to be in excess of one's actual state" (Hansen 2003, 51). The draw towards something other than one's ordinary engagement with the world can be recognized at work in activities often stigmatized as 'escapist,' such as daydreaming, role-playing, being absorbed by literary fiction, playing a video game, designing a virtual environment, etc. This very state of 'excess', was considered by Johan Huizinga as having such a crucial role in social processes that, in the form of play, he appointed it as the fundamental premise to any form of culture (Huizinga 1950).

Following from these insights and interpretations, the existential appeal of virtual worlds can generally be identified in their capabilities to experientially disclose quick, relatively inexpensive routes to (virtual) existential self-realization (Mosca 2012). As such, they deliver opportunities to projectually re-construct and aesthetically (re)fashion one's virtual-self in ways that are significantly more accessible and less inertial than their actual counterparts (Gualeni 2015, 76-78, 128). It is relevant that the thematic and marketing decisions behind commercial videogames can easily be identified and demystified as promising the fulfilment of precisely those fantasies and drives that are hard to attain, illegal, or downright physically impossible in the actual world. With that purpose in mind, commercial videogames generally frame a rational and resource-oriented world-view for their players, whose clear and quantifiable objectives can initially alleviate existential anxiety and are designed to foster feelings of meaningful progress (ibid.).

Relatedly, the flexibility and freedom that is often disclosed through the interactive experience of virtual environments is a key element of their existential potential. Previously we identified freedom as an 'openness' to making something of oneself that is not limited or deterministically framed by one's present situation, by one's own facticity. In this regard – and tying the discussion back to our engagement with digital game studies and Gadamer's philosophical approach to the task-orientation of play as a means of understanding virtual subjectivity – Sartre's own treatment of the notion of play as an existential disposition can prove crucial to understanding the existential significance of virtual subjectivity.

In a discussion on action, Sartre defines play as being "the least possessive attitude" one can have in acting (1966, 740-41). Of all attitudes that the individual can harbour towards the world, it is the least motivated by the goal of *having* the object towards which it is directed. Sartre argues:

The desire to do is here reduced to a certain desire to be. The act is not its own goal for itself; neither does its explicit end represent its goal and its profound meaning; but the function of the act is to make manifest and to present to *itself* the absolute freedom which is the very being of the person. (ibid., 742)

We act in playing, but this doing is only a vehicle for an exploration of our being. As such, "the desire to play is fundamentally the desire to be" (ibid.). For Sartre, then, the activity of play represents an assertion of the individual's capacity for self-determination, thanks to its status as "an activity of

which man is the first origin, for which man himself sets the rules, and which has no consequences except according to the rules posited.” (ibid., 741) As such, play is understood as the impulse to put into action a version of oneself – a way of being – that is determined entirely by one’s freedom, and that escapes the determining limitations of one’s situatedness in the world.

This idea is developed even further in the thought of Eugen Fink, another philosopher in the phenomenological tradition, who concerned himself with play as the theme of some of his major work. Like Sartre, Fink ties play to the freedom of human beings to exceed the contingency of their actual situation. He writes that “playing becomes a distinguished – because it is scarcely restricted – possibility of human freedom.” (2015a, 26)

The central insights of Fink’s theory of play are encapsulated in his notion of the playworld, the “sphere of appearance” (2015a, 28) that is brought forth in the process of play. The playworld is the domain in which players and playthings gain new meanings: in which, to use Fink’s example, a doll becomes a child, while the girl playing with it becomes the child’s mother (ibid., 24). This domain, Fink writes, is “non-actual,” but this is not the same as simply *not* being actual; instead, paradoxically, it is to be both actual and not, the actual, immanent appearance of that which is not actual. It is “an objectively present appearance, which rests on simply actual things and overlays them in an entirely unique way.” (2015b, 92)

For our purposes, what is important to note is what happens to the player in the playworld – namely, the fact that the player exists in the playworld in the form of the role she adopts. As Fink writes, when one takes on a role in the playworld, “one moves about with a fictive conception of oneself, a ‘non-actual comportment’ is portrayed in an actual comportment [...] such self-rapture in the realm of an ‘appearance’ is felt with excitement and pleasure” (ibid., 91).

The reason for this intensity of feeling, Fink argues, lies in the existential significance he grants play. His understanding of human being is one in which, in his words, “the child is indeterminately everything, the old man is determinately little – we are born as many and die as one.” (ibid., 90) The infinite possibility of the child gives way to the singular actuality of the adult: we make something of ourselves, actualizing one of our possibilities of being, only at the cost of all our other non-actualized possibilities. It is only in play, Fink argues, that “we again attain unwasted freedom in the dimension of a mere ‘appearance’.” (ibid.) That is, we regain the freedom, albeit only in the non-actual sphere of the playworld, to explore the freedom of our being in all the possibilities that exceed the self we have actualized.

The virtual world can be understood as a playworld in Fink’s sense. It is the superimposition, upon an actually existing digital environment, of a sphere of non-actual existential significance. In relation to this virtual world, the user enacts a virtual subjectivity, but this enactment of a virtual subjectivity is still an actual activity within the frame of her actual subjectivity. Through this frame, actions gain the specific meaning of an exercise of freedom, of an exploration of possibilities of being beyond the individual’s actualized self. What such a freedom would mean could become more apparent if we turn to Michel Foucault’s (1982; 1988) later work from a hermeneutical perspective. Here, subjects can be recognized as ‘free’ not when they manage to overcome all obstacles and interdictions or when they are beyond the controlling reach of institutional power. Rather, they are ‘free’ when they engage in the critical activity of shaping themselves in relation to their current situation and their contextual constraints (ibid.). This understanding of ‘freedom’ matured in Foucault while studying classical antiquity, where he encountered an ethical approach that was not primarily about showing or

establishing what kinds of behaviours are to be considered morally right. Foucault argued that, in ancient Greece, ethics was not a discipline that tried to answer the question ‘how should I act to be a moral subject?’, but rather ‘what kind of subject do I want to be?’ More simply put, in ancient Greece ethics was not practiced normatively, but rather as the practice of understanding and negotiating one’s possibilities for ethical choices. In other words, for Foucault, freedom is understood projectually: as a form of self-design. On the basis of this understanding of ‘freedom,’ what we are proposing in this section is an understanding of virtual environments as existential machines, that is to say, as technologies capable of disclosing new experiential horizons and new ways to understand projectuality and freedom.

As a case in point, inspired by Arthur Schopenhauer’s notion of ‘transcendental will,’ philosopher Dario Compagno explained that there is a crucial difference between expressing our will in the actual world and in virtual worlds. This difference is to be found in how we conceptualize choice. According to Compagno, human beings do not have freedom of choice in the ‘actual’ world simply because, in the world they share as biological creatures, they cannot know in advance the exact outcome of their choices. Compagno argued that the options for action available to human beings in their linear understanding of time are based on intuition and on the rationalization of the accounts of their past experiences. However - in his interpretation - they are ultimately uncertain about their consequences, which makes their decision not real choices. They are, instead, hopeful decisions that have the quality of being irrevocable (Compagno 2008). In virtual worlds, multiple and alternative courses of action can be experienced and assessed in detail, reverted, adjusted, explored and manipulated again and again. These possibilities emerge from the more flexible relationships with time and causality afforded by the formal modality of digital environments (Gualeni 2015, 59, 124).

7 - CONCLUSION

In this paper we used the notion of the projectual structure of human beings to understand our existential relationships to virtual worlds. We began by outlining how, in existential philosophy the idea of the project is of central importance. An orientation towards a project was presented as not only at the core of what defines a human being in its self-determination, but also as what allows the individual to transcend and exceed her current existential situation.

On the foundation of the body of theoretical work on subjectivity in digital game environments, we proposed the term ‘virtual subjectivity’ to refer to the individual’s being-in-the-virtual-world. We presented the argument that this virtual subjectivity also follows a projectual structure, with the orientation towards implicit or explicit goals in the virtual world shaping the form of the virtual subjectivity. As such, virtual worlds were recognized as not only allowing for specific subjectivities and affording specific projectual and transformational possibilities, but also disclosing a kind of freedom that could not otherwise be a part of our lived experience.

We then argued for an understanding of virtual subjectivity as standing in a nested hierarchy with respect to the individual’s subjectivity. Adopting a virtual subjectivity was framed as a practice undertaken from the perspective of one’s actual subjectivity. In this sense, adopting an existential standpoint within a virtual world and developing a virtual subjectivity have obvious affinities with the processes involved in adopting a role in practices such as dramatic theatre, improvisational theatre, and role-playing (see Gualeni, Vella, and Harrington 2017). It is precisely in analogy with the practices of role-taking and de-roling that virtual subjectivity can be a fecund and comprehensive

understanding of the transformative, self-transformative, and therapeutic possibilities and advantages afforded by virtual worlds. All of those activities are both rooted in our existential relationship with the actual world and – at the same time – are capable of experientially disclosing ways of being, perceiving, and operating that significantly deviate from it. The difference between the two is the existential clearing within which new, critical perspectives are elaborated, and the experiential ground on which the capability of embracing and prefiguring different courses of action is resting.

On this theoretical framework, and building on the tradition of philosophical anthropology, we offered the suggestion that the existential value of virtual world experience lies in its allowing for the exploration of (virtual) possibilities of being beyond those actualized (or actualizable) in the individual's being-in-the-world, as well as the expression of will unconstrained by the irrevocable character that choices have in our actual existence.

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Notes

¹The adjective 'virtual' was originally coined in modern Latin to encapsulate the idea of 'potentiality'. *Virtualis* is a late-medieval neologism which became necessary when Aristotle's concept of δύνάμις (*dynamis*: potentiality, power) had to be translated into Latin (van Binsbergen 1997, 9). The concept of 'potentiality' at the etymological foundation of the adjective '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. A more common connotation of the adjective 'virtual' was presented by Pierre Lévy, not in opposition to 'actual' in the sense discussed above ('that which is presently the case'), but to 'actual' in the specific sense of something that is pertinent to the world humans are native to. (Lévy 1998, 14) The adjective 'virtual' 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).

²In a perspective that is also inspired by the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, the term 'world' generally indicates a set composed of beings that are understood together with all their (detectable) properties

and mutual relationships. More specifically, a world comprises the set outlined above as experienced by one of the beings involved in it. To be identified as a world (and thus to have the quality of ‘worldliness’), such experiences need to be meaningful in the sense that they need to be persistently perceivable and behaviorally consistent (thus intelligible, to a degree) for the being experiencing them. (Gualeni 2015, 6) This interpretation establishes a distinction between the experiences of virtual worlds and those of dreams or hallucinations. The virtual worlds of simulations and videogames are in fact recognized as worlds precisely because they can be accessed, experienced, and returned to at will: they emerge in ways that are repeatable and relatively stable in their mechanical and aesthetic aspects. (ibid.)

³Thrownness (*Geworfenheit*) is a word coined by Martin Heidegger to indicate the fact that being in the world is always being ‘thrown’ into existence, that is to say characterized by qualities, capabilities, and conditions that one has initially no control over, such as the place of one’s birth, one’s gender, the socio-technical contexts one finds oneself into, one’s possible congenital defects, etc., together making up the individual’s facticity. In other words, a being is inevitably ‘thrown in the world’ in a certain way.

⁴Of course, not every digital game – and not every virtual world – gives the user a ‘body’ in the form of a single avatar. Different forms of subject-positioning exist in virtual environments – from situations where the user is given multiple avatars to ones, such as *Sim City* (Maxis 1993), where the user’s subject-position is not tied to any ‘body’ (Vella 2016). All of these represent different phenomenological structures of being-in-the-virtual-world. It is the embodied situation of the single avatar, however, which establishes a phenomenological situation most closely aligned with our being-in-the-world as embodied beings, and, as such, it is not surprising that so many virtual worlds situate the user in this way.

⁵It is arguable that Leino’s conception of the project, though it is explicitly developed in relation to Sartre’s existential philosophy, departs significantly from the existential philosopher’s. This is evident already in the reference to ‘projects’ in the plural, which stands in clear distinction to the singular “unification of the original project” (Sartre 1966, 717) in Sartre’s thought, and it becomes clearer in the implication that a project, rather than a striving towards an unattainable ideal, is something that can achieve ‘fruition’ (Leino 2010, 136).

⁶ In referencing digital games, we decided to align with the guidelines proposed by Gualeni, Fassone, and Linderoth (2019). Those recommendations are mindful of the hybrid nature of the medium in question and address the various forms of authorship that can be attached to digital games.

⁷For instance, in a 1992 biographical volume on Alan Turing, mathematician Andrew Hodges focused his attention on one characteristic in particular that, according to his interpretation, computers structurally borrowed from human cognition: the quality of possessing an intentional cognitive disposition towards objects of intellectual understanding (symbols) (Hodges 1992). Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, a colleague of Turing’s in the Cambridge years, also expressed this awareness with great clarity, stating that: “Turing’s machines. These machines are humans who calculate” (Shanker 1987, 615). Along the same lines, Massimiliano Cappuccio went as far as asserting that each element that composes the machine, from both a logical and mechanical standpoint, presents traits that are inescapably anthropomorphic (Cappuccio 2005, 99, 100). A similar point was speculatively raised by Karl Popper’s 1953 essay “Science: Conjectures and Refutations” (Popper 1968).