

Virtual World Weariness: On Delaying the Experiential Erosion of Digital Environments

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Introduction

Media and game scholars often approach digital games as artificial systems that disclose interactive situations and scenarios for their players. For instance, Ian Bogost¹, Paolo Pedercini², and Riccardo Fassone³ characterize those situations and scenarios as inherently limited in their possibilities to be experienced and manipulated. In their respective works, these three authors frequently focus on the spatial and operational limits afforded by virtual environments. The way those limitations are set, they argue, is one of the most characteristic expressive features of the media form, and can reveal some of the designers' ideological positionings.

In a way that aligns with the philosophical traditions of phenomenology and existentialism, in this chapter I will use 'world' to indicate a group of beings (together with their individual properties and mutual relationships) that is understood as a unified set. For that set of 'somethings' to be recognized

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as a 'world' by a subject, it is necessary for that subject to be able to establish an interactive and mutually-constitutive relationship with those 'somethings.' Moreover, worlds need to be, to a degree, perceptually persistent and behaviourally consistent (that is stably intelligible) from the perspective of the being experiencing them⁴. This interpretation of 'world' is not only concise and widely applicable, but it also allows me to establish what I consider a useful distinction between being in a world and what we experience during dreams, hallucinatory states, or dissociative events (like the mild ones of daydreaming or when immersed in literary fiction). Virtual worlds are thus understood as particular kinds of relationships that can be established with digital environments. These virtual worlds disclose artificial and often extraordinary⁵ horizons of possibilities for both doing and experiencing. With reference to the opening paragraph, the inherent artificiality of virtual environments is also understood as a guarantee of their finitude and limitedness.

¹ Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT press, 2006).

² Paolo Pedercini, "Invisible walls, puffy clouds, and the unheavenly world behind them," *Blog post*, April 1, 2014, <http://www.molleindustria.org/blog/invisible-walls-puffy-clouds/> (last accessed 24.4.2019).

³ Riccardo Fassone, *Every Game is an Island: Endings and Extremities in Video Games*. (Bloomsbury Publishing, USA, 2017).

⁴ Stefano Gualeni, *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools: How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer*. (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 6.

⁵ In this context, the adjective 'extra-ordinary' corresponds to its etymological origin, indicating something that transcends the ordinary, experiences that go beyond one's everyday identity and one's customary relationship with the actual world.

The qualities and affordances that were just discussed are not exclusive to digital game spaces, but characterize practices and interactions that take place in relation to a variety of world-disclosing technologies⁶.

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In light of this observation, the question of why this chapter specifically focuses its attention on digital games and on their inevitable (spatial) boundedness emerges as a relevant one to ask. The core of my argument as to why videogame environments are particularly relevant technologies to examine lies first and foremost in their being experientially configured and encountered as ‘worlds’. As worlds, the artificial and interactive spaces of digital games allow us to play with (and around) their affordances and their technical limitations, and to extract meaning and pleasure from both of them. It is interesting to observe that – in several languages including English – the term ‘play’ does not only signify an enjoyable, non-serious activity, but it also indicates the limited space in which a mechanism can move and perform its operations. From this standpoint, the creators of any kinds of virtual worlds can be recognized as holding a position of power in relation to their audience, as the former largely configure the possibility space of ‘play’ for the latter⁷.

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A common understanding of the role of a game developer includes establishing (or at least partially establishing) what is interactively and perceptually available in (video)game environments: what elements and behaviors those worlds include and allow, and what is – instead – left out of their ‘possibility horizon’. The term ‘possibility horizon’ references the Ancient Greek origin of the term ‘horizon’, ὄρος (*oros*), which denotes a frontier – a spatial limit. On this etymological foundation, ‘horizon’ is used here to indicate the spatial and operational boundaries that a (video)game environment affords its players.

⁶ In his 1990 book *Technology and the lifeworld: from garden to earth*, American philosopher of science and technology Don Ihde presented his understanding of the implications of technologies by analysing the ways in which they contribute to how reality can be experienced and interpreted by human beings. Among the four kinds of human-technology relations he discusses, the third - that of ‘alterity relations’ - is specifically relevant for our discussion. In alterity relations, according to Ihde, technologies do not filter or enhance our capabilities for interaction and perception, but are the very *terminus* of our experience. These technologies give their users access to artificial contexts for experience and interaction (while the everyday world - not having an active role in this relationship - remains in the background of the experience) (Ihde 1990). Commonly used examples to exemplify alterity relations are the activities of getting money from an ATM machine or playing a digital game.

⁷ I consider it necessary to add the adverb ‘largely’ in this sentence, as the ‘possibility space’ of a virtual world cannot be deemed as uniquely determined by the intentions of programmers, designers, or creative directors. It inevitably involves a degree of compromise with what the players know about the virtual world in question, what beliefs they hold about it, and what the players desire to do within it. For the developers it is not always possible to predict, determine, and restrain players’ aspirations and actions. Digital game glitch-runs and their ‘modding’ are especially evident examples of how our relationship with those virtual worlds is effectively a negotiation, and not an imposition. The same can be said about various approaches to play that are overtly rebelling against the functional intentions and implicit ideologies that structure game worlds. Transgressive approaches to game rules, game affordances, and game conventions are recognized as forms of social subversion in the works of several authors including, notably, Espen Aarseth and Mary Flanagan. From their theoretical standpoint, subversive play is an important cultural tool that stimulates independent, critical thought, self-reflection, and promotes social change (Aarseth 2007; Flanagan 2009). To quote Fassone on this same point, the rigid borders of a game’s formal structure “do not prevent playing from being an intrinsically transformative, interpretative and ideological act.” Riccardo Fassone, *Every Game Is an Island: Borders, Endings, Extremities in Video Games* (Doctoral thesis discussed at the department of humanistic studies of the University of Turin, Turin, Italy, 2013), 30.

Virtual World Weariness

In this book chapter I will present notions and ideas that originally emerged in the context of my practical involvement with videogames both as a player and as a designer. I will start from discussing a particular feeling that emerges in relation to my playful encounters with the ‘possibility horizons’ of videogames as described in the previous section. I am referring here to the realization, as a player, that a game environment can be experientially exhausted and is, as such, ultimately banal. In other words, I will examine how our deliberate engagement with the interactive environments of digital games can trigger sensations that are analogous to what Romantic authors referred to as *Weltschmerz* (‘world-weariness’).

The Romantic idea of *Weltschmerz* can be understood as being almost exactly antithetical to the concept of the ‘sublime’ embraced during the same period.⁸ If, on the one hand, the Romantic sublime focused on the awe-inspiring vastness of nature and the impossibility for the human senses and the human intellect to ever grasp its size and meaning, on the other hand – for someone experiencing a feeling of *Weltschmerz* – the world appears to be meaningless and dissatisfactory.⁹ Whereas the Romantic poets find themselves inadequate and fragile in relation to a sense of sublime that transcends their perceptual and intellectual capabilities, this contrasting

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sense of world-weariness is a close relative of the feeling of hopelessness, and even boredom; it is the realization that our experiences of a world make us progressively more aware of the impossibility of transcendence¹⁰. In line with these interpretations, in the context of this chapter I will use *Weltschmerz* to indicate the sensation that a certain world is inadequate to satisfy our intellectual and emotional aspirations¹¹.

There are many aspects of our relationships with digital games that can elicit (or be accompanied by) feelings of world-weariness. In analogy with actual-world weariness, the dissatisfaction and the boredom with digital game environments emerges from aspects of their finitude and banality. The most common among these ‘world-pains’ are the players’ direct encounter with the game’s spatial boundaries (tall walls, invisible barriers, puffy clouds, cliffs, fences, etc.). Other frequent triggers of *virtual Weltschmerz* are, for example, the recognition of aesthetic repetitions of game textures and assets (buildings, trees, statues, textures, characters, etc.), and the recurrence of interactive patterns and in-game situations (the dreary routine of ‘grinding’, the ceaseless repetition of the same lines in dialogue with non-player-character, the very un-surprising occurrence of surprise encounters, etc.)¹².

⁸ See: Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

⁹ Wilhelm Alfred Braun, *Types of weltschmerz in german poetry* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1905).

¹⁰ A similar reflection concerning the sublimity and the domestication of videogame spaces was offered in 2011 by Paul Martin. In his article “The Pastoral and the Sublime in Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion” Martin identified the ‘sublime’ (a concept which involves nuances of both immensity, incalculability, and danger) and the ‘pastoral’ (what is familiar and non-threatening) as two successive moments of our experiential relationship with a certain videogame space (Martin 2011).

¹¹ In a way that resonates with this interpretation of ‘world-weariness’, Norwegian existential philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe clarified that “[m]an is a tragic animal. Not because of his smallness, but because he is too well endowed. Man has longings and spiritual demands that reality cannot fulfil. We have expectations of a just and moral world. Man requires meaning in a meaningless world.” (in the 1990 documentary *The philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe in his 90th year*, Original Films AS, Tromsø, Norway)

¹² The notion that the ‘world-weariness’ of artificial environments can be mitigated by pursuing aesthetic variety and breaking the repetition of modules might be interesting to apply back in the actual world. I am thinking, for

Some of the recent work by game scholar Sebastian Möring focuses on the sense of boredom and meaninglessness that emerge when the challenges that are present in a game world have been overcome or removed and all enemies have been defeated.¹³ Experiencing such a virtual world can by definition trigger the feeling of weariness discussed above, as significant parts of its meaning and appeal have already been effectively done-away (or played-away). This is especially the case in relation to the so-called ‘games of progression’,¹⁴ whose ludic setup affords and invites the overcoming and the removal of challenges and enemies as their *raison d’être*. In line with what was just observed, I have suggested elsewhere that perhaps the only possibility for something extra-ordinary (and to a degree transcendent) to happen within virtual environments is to be found in our experiences of glitches, by which I mean our interactive encounter with non-catastrophic malfunctions of computer software or hardware that are recognized as anomalous.¹⁵

If it is evident for us – as players – that the experience of empty, repetitive, and evidently limited environments is a crucial trigger for virtual *Weltschmerz*, it is equally clear that the designers and developers of digital games have an interest in keeping their audience from experiencing that particular kind of dissatisfaction. As a consequence, the most common design techniques aimed at delaying the emergence of virtual world weariness involve making those triggers as inconspicuous and difficult to encounter as possible for the players. A very obvious example of this design objective can be recognized in the fact that the literal horizons of digital game environments are often presented as the aesthetic or thematic illusions of distant lands, buildings, cities, islands, planets, and star systems that exist at the periphery of our

vision and cannot be reached or examined closely. Similar strategies of unknowability or concealment of the spatial boundaries of virtual worlds also include their being presented to the player in ways that make contextual sense within the fictional setting of a certain environment; to represent them as parts of the environment that are intuitively impossible to overcome, inaccessible, or obviously deadly. Among the most common ways to give fictional meaning and to disguise the spatial limits of digital games are precipitous mountain ridges, impassable lakes of magma, cliffs, broken bridges, tall walls, electrified fences, endless stretches of water, *et cetera*. Other strategies to prevent the experiential encounter with a virtual space’s borders and boundaries involve creating game spaces that have ‘periodic boundary conditions’ (worlds that wrap onto themselves as if they were enfolded over a sphere). This is the case, for example, of the 1979 arcade classic *Asteroids* (1979). Yet another approach for making the spatial boundaries of a videogame impossible to be experienced *as* boundaries is having a digital game that progressively generates new (coherent and playable) content as the

instance, about the possible application of principles and ideas presented in this paper to modular and repetitive architectural designs such as those commonly characterizing public housing and rationalist city-planning.

¹³ Sebastian Möring, “On the Relation of Boredom and Care in Computer Game Play from an Existential Ludological Perspective,” paper presented at the *Ludic Boredom Workshop*, 2018, June 1st, 2018 at the Brandenburg Center for Media Studies, Potsdam, Germany.

¹⁴ Jesper Juul, “The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression,” in *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings*, edited by F. Mäyrä (Tampere, Finland: Tampere University Press, 2002), 323–329.

¹⁵ See: Stefano Gualeni, “On the de-familiarizing and re-framing effects of glitches and glitch-alikes” proceedings of the 2019 *DiGRA International Conference: Game, Play, and the Emergent Ludo Mix*, 2019.

players move beyond spaces that were previously visited (as do Mojang's *Minecraft* (2009), CCP's *EVE Online* (2003) and Hello Games' *No Man's Sky* (2016) to name a few).

As indicated in the title of this book chapter, my objective with this text is that of identifying and discussing game design approaches and solutions for delaying the experiential erosion of digital environments. In other words, for now I will specifically focus on the spatiality of virtual environments, and on ways to deal with their artificiality and their consequent finitude as designers. I will pursue this objective through reflections upon my own hands-on experience as a videogame designer as well as in structured discussions with scholars and independent videogame developers who treat working around the emergence of world-weariness as one of the focal points of their design work. The interviewees for this essay were (in alphabetical order):

- Mike Cook – Independent videogame developer and game researcher (<http://www.gamesbyangelina.org>)
- Mark R. Johnson – Game studies scholar and independent videogame developer of *Ultima Ratio Regum* (<https://www.markjohnsongames.com/games/ultima-ratio-regum>)
- Antonios Liapis – Researcher in the field of procedural videogame content generation (<http://www.antoniosliapis.com>)
- Niccolò Tedeschi – Artist and game developer at *Santa Ragione*, the independent videogame development team behind *Fotonica* (<http://www.fotonica-game.com>) and *Mirrormoon EP* (<http://www.mirrormoongame.com>)

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On delaying the experiential erosion of digital environments

Emphasizing a particular kind of existential dissatisfaction that manifests itself in digital environments, researcher and developer Mike Cook argued that “we dream of doing and being a particular thing in a world, and then we find ourselves unable to do it. It is a typical 21st century condition – to be trying our hardest to escape into a digital world and then realize that we cannot act in the way we wanted. It is almost like being in a nightmare where one is unable to move one’s arms, or to speak.”

Interestingly, our ‘weariness’ has, for Cook, less to do with the granularity of the environment in question and more with its regularity: the more familiar we become with a certain world and its logics, the less interesting and surprising this world gets, progressively losing any sense of the sublime. In his interview for this essay, Cook focused his attention on the repetition and the modularity of elements in digital environments, aesthetical components of the experience of a game world that are particularly problematic for someone, like himself, who aspires to generate interesting, playable environments algorithmically. Over time, he argued, “we become numb to the patterns inherent in the algorithms that constitute the world.”

Solutions to this problem in particular were largely shared by all the developers and researchers I interviewed. Everyone recommended, for example, the intentional masking or breaking of computer-generated patterns (through procedural content generation) with authored content (that is custom elements directly designed by humans). The rationale behind this widely-shared advice is that the integration of procedural content with custom-created assets can trick the human brain into misinterpreting the complexity of a computer generator and overestimating

the aesthetic variety and experiential richness of a digital environment. “The player builds a mental model of how content is generated in a certain world,” Cook explained,

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“and then they encounter something that does not fit that model. Their assumption that the hand-made content comes from the same algorithm that generated the rest of the world prompts them to re-evaluate their initial mental model, and in this way their respect and interest for that world erodes a little slower.”

Additional ways to mask the regularities and the repetitions of procedurally generated content in virtual environments that were discussed by my interviewees include:

- adding ‘noise’ to pre-designed game content; that is, allowing a generator to introduce small aesthetical and functional variations to existing game modules in order to make it hard for the players to recognize them as something already ‘known’ (this is the case, among others, of *Mossmouth’s* 2013 videogame *Spelunky*);
- giving the players themselves the possibility and tools to modify, destroy, or reconstruct shared virtual environments. Liapis explained in his interview for this essay that these tools allow the players to provide additional complexity and experiential richness to interactive, digital spaces that will – because of that – inevitably feel less artificial and more ‘lived’;
- using data from the internet to both disguise procedurally generated patterns and to allow a digital environment to feel more ‘worldly’ by means of referencing recent, actual events;
- erasing all the saved states and information about a world when a game session ends. According to what Johnson argued in his interview for this essay, losing information and access to a world as well as the civilizations that inhabited it, its undiscovered religions and tales, and its unvisited lands after a game is over not only makes it harder to reverse-engineer the ways in which that world was generated, but can also trigger a lingering feeling of mystery about it.

In addition to the virtual *Weltschmerz* elicited by experientially encountering the boundaries of virtual worlds and to the stale repetition of spatial as well as interactive patterns, both Tedeschi and Johnson recognized a third trigger for ‘world-weariness’ that is common in contemporary videogames: the fact that events in virtual worlds are often inconsistent with their narrative (or more widely thematic) context. The experience of contextual dissonance emerges from the need that the game developers have to constantly negotiate their creative and expressive aspirations with technical and

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functional limitations imposed by the technologies they are using. As players, according to both Tedeschi and Johnson, we are constantly (and painfully) comparing virtual experiences with actual ones (that are considered our ‘phenomenological bedrock’), and we are also measuring the former against the backdrop of established expressive forms, their genres and

canons. Tedeschi clarified this point with an example that I believe will be illuminating for the readers. He stated that

“in *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), a videogame that amply borrows its themes and aesthetics from the Western movie genre, it is possible to walk into various saloons and engage non-player characters in a game of poker. What I am about to discuss resonates with the representations of the American Old West that we are all more or less familiar with: I am in a saloon playing poker in the world of *Red Dead Redemption*. After a few hands, I have almost lost all of my money and so – while the game is still ongoing – I decide to stand up, shoot all of the other players, and walk out with all the money. Once I have killed all of the other players, however, no money is to be found on their bodies or on the table where we were playing. Apparently, *Red Dead Redemption* treats the game at the poker table as a technically separate instance of the world, rather than a part of it. My actions, which were completely consistent with what has been established in the Western genre, are not acknowledged by the game. At that point, that world revealed its artificial constitution and lost its ‘worldliness’ for me... To a point that everything from that point on felt phoney and pointless.”

In response to the problem of thematic inconsistency, Tedeschi and Johnson each suggested design solutions that the creators of interactive, digital environments could start to employ with today’s technologies and tools. In his interview, Tedeschi argued that the kind of contextual dissonance that he diagnosed could be avoided by setting up worlds that do not reference the actual one. Resorting to his words referring to *Santa Ragione*’s design for their 2013 game *Mirrormoon EP*, we learn that they tried

“to propose a very abstract experience in terms of narration, interaction and aesthetics. The world of *Mirrormoon EP* is never wholly defined: it is an open world, a minimal world that is simply ‘suggested’ to the player. This ‘openness’ might not be the final solution to the problem of thematic inconsistency, but I think it goes in the right direction, that is letting the players interpret what they encounter rather than pre-determining for them how a world is to be understood on the basis of previous, common experiences. This could be understood as a Duchampian approach to game design: *ce sont les regardeurs qui font les tableaux.*”

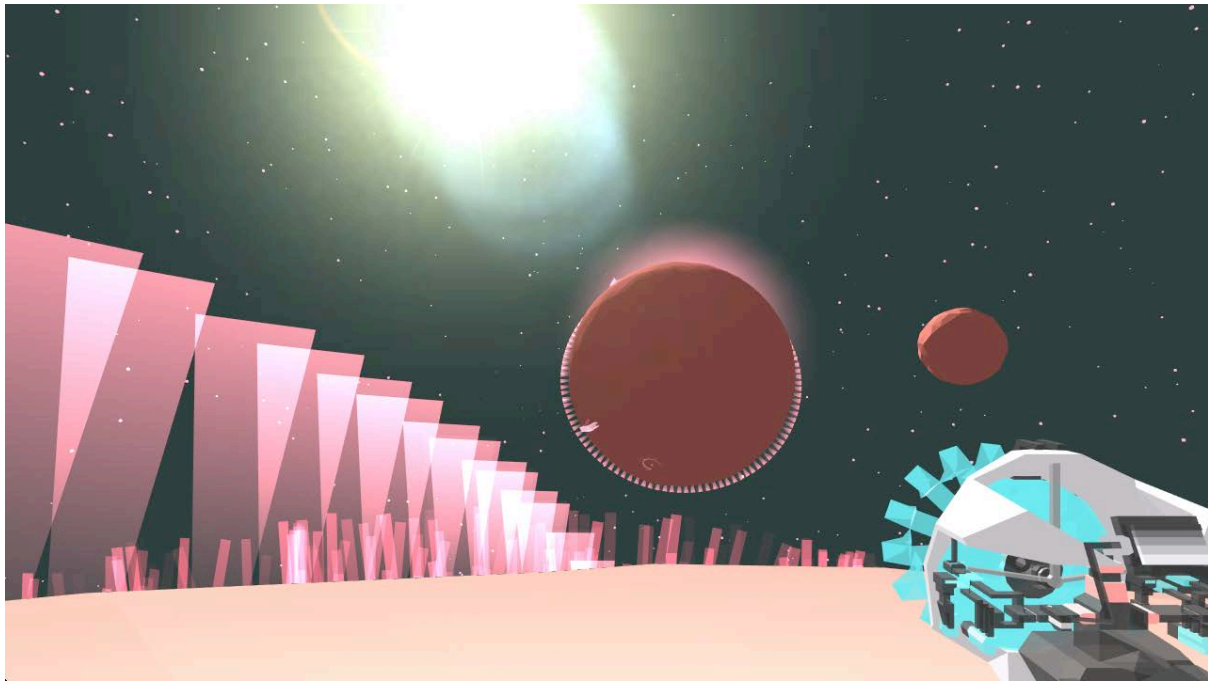


Figure 70: A screenshot of *Mirrormoon EP* (Santa Ragione, 2013) exemplifying the minimal, procedurally-generated features of their explorable content

Discussing the same problem specifically in relation to procedurally generated environments, Johnson foresaw developments and new techniques that could ensure the emergence of more believable and coherent worlds. Johnson, who pioneered some of those techniques himself in his 2012 game *Ultima Ratio Regum*, insisted that part of the solution consists in striving to generate all the components of a virtual world in an interconnected fashion, so that each aspect natively relates to every other aspect. It is relatively easy, wrote Johnson,

“to make a generator that spits out Game-of-Thrones-esque names for cities like ‘Wolfweald’, or ‘Queen’s Throne’, or ‘Dragonlance’, or whatever... But the real challenge is making those generated things to ‘percolate’ down through the remainder of that world, to reflect in everything: from how people speak, to what they wear, how they act, what their history is, et cetera.”

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Conclusions

Beyond contributing fitting comments on the design and the procedural generation of less ‘painful’ worlds to this chapter, Liapis mentioned in his interview something that I consider to be worth particular attention; something with which – in the cautionary spirit that is typical of the concluding sections of some literary works – I would like to close this essay.

In response to one of my questions – or, rather, as an amendment to it – Liapis called my attention to the fact that it would be paradoxical to think of our sense of unease and dissatisfaction in videogames as simply meaning that we would prefer to pursue any task in the actual world. He did not believe that we would – say – do laundry or grocery shopping rather than exploring enchanted kingdoms in a high-fantasy game world. Although he admitted

having experienced the feeling of *virtual world-weariness*, (which he considered not only common, but inherent in how we currently design and experience videogame worlds), Liapis pointed out that his way of coping with virtual *Weltschmerz* does not primarily involve the idea of 'returning to the actual'. He argued that his ways of dealing with the kind of *Weltschmerz* induced by a digital game usually consist in starting to play a new game: begin to explore a new environment, a new 'possibility horizon', a new promise of happiness and satisfaction. To be sure, Liapis appeared to be well aware that these ambitions of his cannot be fulfilled by means of the systemic artificiality of today's digital technologies (or even at all). However, he seemed equally dissatisfied with the prospect of considering actual experiences as the answer to our shared malcontent with virtual ones.

I did not mean to imply (in this essay or elsewhere) that the actual world will ultimately satisfy and complete us, or that our aspirations will finally obtain an adequate response in our experiential relationship with it. If the Romantic age had not offered enough examples as to why that might not be the case, Ancient Greek tragedies and the artistic and philosophical currents of Existentialism and Absurdism could also be mentioned as historical landmarks of Western culture's awareness of the meaninglessness of our existential struggle in this world. What I propose in this essay is the idea that *all* worlds (regardless of their virtual or actual constitution) are ultimately absurd, and that technologies cannot be expected to fix the inevitably boring, painful, and even tragic dimensions of our existence. Digital environments are, I argue, better understood as existential tools:

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not as the contexts where we can pursue complete happiness and satisfaction, but as instruments that allow us to negotiate with various aspects of our (individual as well as collective) existence in previously-unexperienced guises.

Regarding this standpoint, the human being cannot be understood as existentially 'solvable' (or possible to be completed and satisfied) by technological means. And this is not simply a problem with the current technologies or our mastery of them: we are constitutively bound to dissatisfaction, and inherently driven to explore and experiment with new worlds and unfamiliar possibilities of being. Virtual environments, in their peculiar ways, arguably offer those experiences and possibilities, and in doing so, they contribute to our existential struggle in both allowing us to transcend some aspects of our everyday relationship with the actual world, and in disclosing new ways in which our very incompleteness can be experienced and understood.