A Phenomenological Analysis of Massively Multiplayer Online Games

by

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Abstract

This dissertation conducts a phenomenological analysis of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) – networked computer applications that thousands of people play simultaneously using avatars to interact with one another and with computer-controlled entities within a game-world typically rendered in 3D.

Part 1 argues that existing studies of MMOGs often utilize concepts that, while presumed to be well understood, are often problematic in ways that conflict with the actual claims of the studies in which they play a central role. Three issues in particular are highlighted. It is argued, first, that common conceptions of virtual should not influence understanding of MMOGs; second, that there are prima facie problems with how existing studies frame the subject of avatars; and, third, that there are substantive problems with accounts of avatars that involve notions of representation or embodiment.

Part 2 develops an interpretation of MMOGs that both extends understanding of these games, and reflexively unsettles the traditional phenomenological perspective that orients this interpretation itself. The analysis begins by arguing that MMOGs are worlds – understood as
places of meaningful, fallen, thrown, collective conduct – and introduces the idea of conjuncture to account for how Dasein and avatars function together at an existential-ontological level. In so doing, the dissertation puts pressure on the fundamental-ontological distinction between Dasein and entities other than Dasein, the idea that Dasein alone discloses world, and the notion that whatever Dasein uses in its environment only obtains a place because of the de-severing and directionality of Dasein. By interpreting the virtuality of MMOGs as the creative repetition of ontological structures of existence, the dissertation provides insight into the phenomena of virtual death and time. This in turn draws into question the idea that quantifying time blocks access to original human temporality, and that the transcendence of Dasein uniquely involves self-overcoming.
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Even though, technically, I wrote this dissertation, it would be terrible to think of it as anything other than a collaboration.

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1 Introduction

This dissertation conducts a phenomenological analysis of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs). For the purposes of this introduction, these games can be regarded as networked computer applications that tens-of-thousands of people (or more) play simultaneously using characters or avatars to interact with one another and with computer-controlled entities (commonly referred to as non-player characters or npcs) within a game-world that is typically rendered in (or as) 3D.

Given only its title and the preceding brief description, this dissertation may appear odd to both groups for whom it is primarily intended: those who have already been studying MMOGs from an academic point of view; and those who study – or, perhaps better, practice – phenomenology in particular, and Continental philosophy in general. The first of these groups is likely to find odd the methodology or approach that I take towards analyzing a subject with which they are already familiar. By and large, what members of this group may discover, especially in Part 2 of this dissertation, is a language and a way of thinking about MMOGs that is, at best, foreign and, at worst, somewhat alienating. On the other hand, the second of these groups is likely to find odd the very subject of the phenomenological inquiry named in this dissertation’s title. Despite an established tradition of dealing with issues arising from contemporary technologies in general, phenomenology has not focused explicitly on computer games even broadly construed, let alone on MMOGs in particular. As such, what members of this second group may discover from the outset is a set of phenomena whose need to be investigated philosophically is not at first apparent.

The aim of this introduction is to mitigate some of these various forms of unease. In particular, I first attempt to describe the value or worth that comes from taking this particular approach towards this particular subject. To this end, in addition to providing a précis of the arguments that will follow, I concentrate in this introduction on describing what is at stake in, and what will ultimately be gained by, establishing MMOGs as a site of explicitly phenomenological inquiry. Although this introduction broadly proceeds in the same order as the arguments that appear in the following chapters, I also deviate from this arrangement in order to discuss concepts, themes, or motivations that play a pivotal role in the orientation of the dissertation as a whole.
For reasons discussed in chapter 2, MMOGs have recently become a subject of academic interest in disciplines such as economics, psychology, media studies, cultural studies, information studies, communications, and law. By and large, and despite their characteristic differences, the studies that have been conducted in these fields have tended to focus immediately on what they respectively take to be the new and significant forms of behaviour and interaction enabled by MMOGs, and on the broader social practices that seem to be affected by, and that sometimes seem to be emerging from, such conduct and interactions. In my view, taking such a “direct” approach to the study of MMOGs is intuitively satisfying and has produced tangible, positive results. It has the merit of dealing right away with what people in general have tended to find most striking and perplexing about MMOGs – their (so called) “social complexity” – and responds to the interest that has been generated about these games by reports and discussions in the media at large. By dealing head-on with what seems to be going on in MMOGs – with what people seem to be doing, how they seem to be dealing with one another, and what seems to happen as a consequence – these studies have also helped to establish MMOGs as a subject worth investigating in its own right; bypassing the (once enticing) view that, as a kind of computer game, MMOGs could be understood relatively easily according to the model of more traditional forms of entertainment or multi-media (for example, as texts with a special kind of narrative structure, or as “interactive cinema”). In addition, there is no question that existing studies of MMOGs have contributed to a better and more widespread understanding of the activities and organizations apparently arising in these games. In so doing, these studies have provided several approachable and well informed perspectives on why what seems to be going on in these games matters, even for those who do not play them. As a whole, existing studies of MMOGs have proven to be insightful, productive, and deserving of their influence both within the academic disciplines named above, and among those with a broader interest in thinking about these computer games.

In Part 1 of this dissertation, however, I argue that there is also a need for a different kind of reflection on several of the concepts that existing studies of MMOGs have applied in their various analyses. While these concepts have been presumed to be relatively well understood and sufficiently well defined, I argue that they are often more problematic than they have been taken
to be, and that they are problematic in ways that often conflict with the actual claims of the studies in which they play a central role.

Although Part 1 of this dissertation may appear to be critical of existing studies of MMOGs, it is actually not my intention for the arguments that I defend to be seen as invalidating or repudiating these studies themselves. Rather, what I want to demonstrate by way of these arguments is that – notwithstanding the merits of taking a “direct” approach – there is a corresponding need to approach the subject of MMOGs more cautiously and, in some cases, with more uncertainty about what exactly is going on in these games than has so far been the norm. Existing studies of MMOGs have been productively guided by trying to make sense, using the tools at hand, of what they have taken to be (and what people in general have taken to be) of interest and significance in these computer games. By bringing into focus some of the issues that have been overlooked while taking such a direct approach, my aim is to raise some question about just how well we are actually positioned to make adequate sense of the phenomena at hand.

I begin Part 1 by arguing that there are three problems with allowing what I refer to as common conceptions of virtual – notions that involve taking the virtual to be, for example, not quite real, or other than fully actual, or real only in effect – to influence understanding of MMOGs. First, I argue that it is not clear to what extent MMOGs actually are virtual in any of these common senses. Second, I argue that these common conceptions, in virtue of being defined inherently in opposition to reality or actuality, conflict with the way in which MMOGs unsettle binary distinctions, such as those that are often assumed to hold in the case of conceptual pairs such as real/imaginary, genuine/fake, fictional/non-fictional, fantasy/reality, inside/outside, worldly/otherworldly, etc. Third, I argue that common conceptions of virtual should not influence our understanding of MMOGs because such conceptions might ultimately prove dangerous both for theories about MMOGs, and for those actually participating in these kinds of computer game.
Why begin an analysis of MMOGs by focusing on common conceptions of virtual? Academic discussions regarding the virtual (not only in its common senses, of course, but in some rather uncommon senses too) are both voluminous and widespread, so why draw the subject of MMOGs into the orbit of this particular term? If, as I myself argue, common conceptions of virtual are so problematic for understanding MMOGs, why not simply bypass such notions altogether and move on immediately to more promising ground?

Part 1 focuses on common conceptions of virtual in order to bring to light a tension that often manifests in existing studies of MMOGs. While these studies often express misgivings about – and sometimes even outright decry – using common conceptions of virtual to help understand MMOGs, they have not done enough to actually dissuade such uses, and even tend to rely on such notions, at least at an intuitive level, to do real work in communicating what these studies themselves take to be something important and decisive about MMOGs. Moreover, when these studies have tried to deal directly with issues that arise as a consequence of using the term “virtual” in any of its usual ways, they have tended to respond with solutions that I think are both intuitively unsatisfying and philosophically problematic: either by substituting for the term “virtual” other terms (such as “synthetic”) that are arguably subject to many of the same difficulties; or by continuing to use the term “virtual” but excusing its use in this particular context by eliminating substantial differences between what is taken to be real and what is taken to be virtual – effectively making “virtual” and “real” out to be one and the same, at least for the purposes of studying MMOGs (but perhaps inadvertently in a broader regard too).

Expressed in somewhat different terms, my analysis of common conceptions of virtual is intended to suggest that existing studies of MMOGs have been caught in a sort of conceptual double-bind: one in which they have been (with good reason) trepidant about leveraging common conceptions of virtual in the study of MMOGs; and yet one in which they have not been able to entirely do away with some notion of the virtual, even while they have also yet either to discover or establish a sufficiently robust notion of (or alternative to) this particular term. The idea that MMOGs are virtual continues to have tract and exert pressure on studies that would prefer, or have even actively attempted, not to be beholden to this term. The fact that this has been the case deserves closer consideration.
Why do I think that it is important to bring the aforementioned tension into focus? Primarily because, as will become clear in chapter 9, dealing directly with this tension proves to be productive, initially for the study of MMOGs, but perhaps also for the analysis of other phenomena that might also be held to be virtual in at least some sense. Broadly speaking, I do not think that we should simply do away with the idea that MMOGs (or other “information technologies” for that matter) are virtual (even if we could); but nor do I think that we should presume to know immediately what their virtuality consists of. We should not leave the term “virtual” to those who would think it only in a binary, oppositional way; but nor do I think that we should simply import some other (non-common) notion of the virtual from another domain in order to make it work for the study of MMOGs. This is why, in chapter 9, I propose a conception of virtuality that I think is useful for understanding MMOGs, avoids problems such as the three discussed in Part 1, and captures what I argue to be a decisive characteristic of MMOGs in general.

The notion of virtuality that I propose is characterized in terms of what I refer to as the creative repetition of ontological structures of human existence. Although it would be out of place to attempt to characterize this conception fully here, it is worthwhile to emphasize several features that set this conception apart from those discussed in Part 1:

• Rather than presuming a common understanding of the term “virtual”, and instead of simply transposing a notion of the virtual defined in another context to the study of MMOGs, the notion of virtuality that I propose is induced (rather than deduced) hermeneutically from out of the subject whose study this notion is also intended to aid. In part, this means that this notion is proposed as a consequence of a preliminary phenomenological analysis of certain phenomena having to do with MMOGs; and yet also functions as a way of extending the interpretation that I develop for these phenomena, and for other phenomena which come to light as a result of thinking about the virtuality of MMOGs in the way that I propose. In addition, however, inducing this concept hermeneutically means that this notion reflexively puts in question the adequacy of the conceptual framework that itself gives rise to this very notion. The term will thus both help us to understand MMOGs, and challenge some of the basic suppositions of the phenomenological approach that gives this concept life.
• My notion of virtuality is (in a phenomenological sense) an ontological notion: it provides a way of thinking about the Being of MMOGs, one that does not involve a comparison with, or opposition to, “reality” or “actuality”, but that takes place at a level of analysis that is prior to differentiating, for example, “real” from “non real”. This is the basic sense in which my notion of virtuality corresponds with an idea of phenomenological *epoche*.

• The idea of creative ontological repetition that is at the heart of the conception of virtuality I propose is meant to account for the differing intensities and combinations of ontological continuities *and* ontological differences that will become apparent once my preliminary phenomenological analysis of MMOGs gets underway. In this regard, referring to MMOGs as virtual worlds (in my sense) is meant to equally convey both a sense of how continuous and how different MMOGs are with human existence assessed at an ontological level.

• My notion of creative ontological repetition shares points of contact with several different philosophers and yet is not drawn directly from any one or group of them. With that being said, one of the underlying themes inherent in this idea (inspired in particular by Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence) is that when repetition is creative (as opposed to cyclical, mundane, bare, mute, or merely repetitive) it can be at once an expression and a source of a powerful vitality. In this respect, interpreting the virtuality of MMOGs in the sense that I propose is meant to give voice to the idea that MMOGs are not only products of a human impulse to create, but that they also generate a certain kind of creative power in virtue of repeating fundamental aspects of the human way of Being.

• Interpreting the virtuality of MMOGs in the sense that I propose will ultimately make it clear that the reason why MMOGs matter, even to those who do not play them, goes quite a lot deeper than existing studies of MMOGs have been able to articulate. These games, or so I claim, ultimately have to do with our very nature as finite beings that inhabit world and are temporal. They are not just constituted by phenomena that one may or may not encounter in the course of existence, but are one mode in which human existence comes to be what it is precisely by over-stepping the bounds of its everyday Being-in-the-world.
II

Following my analysis of common conceptions of virtual, Part 1 continues by focusing on ways in which existing studies of MMOGs conceive of the avatars that – as is commonly said – people use or control while playing these computer games.¹ I begin by arguing that the way in which existing studies of MMOGs frame the subject of avatars raises a host of questions that these studies have yet to answer, and cannot easily answer. In particular, I argue that these studies tend to treat even manifestly different conceptions of avatars as if they were roughly equivalent; that treating these conceptions in this way overlooks a number of challenges that immediately come to mind when referring to avatars in these usual ways; and that it is not clear that these conceptions can be consistently taken to refer to one and the same subject without guidance that existing studies have so far not provided, and may not be in position to provide.

After discussing these *prima facie* difficulties with how existing studies of MMOGs frame the subject of avatars, I then discuss some substantive problems with two widespread and influential types of account of avatars: those that maintain that avatars in some sense represent (what I refer to as *representational conceptions of avatars*), and those that conceive of avatars as bodies of some kind (what I refer to as *corporeal conceptions of avatars*). With respect to the first of these kinds of case, I argue that what existing studies of MMOGs actually mean by referring to avatars as representations is not as clear as these studies take it to be; that it is not clear what avatars are supposed to represent, or how what they are supposed to represent is meant to be identified; and that it is not difficult to raise challenges for at least three intuitive senses in which avatars might be thought to represent. With respect to the second kind of case, I argue that thinking of avatars as bodies in the sense that I allege proponents of this kind of view have been thinking is *instrumentalistic*, not only in that it regards avatars as tools or instruments to be used by a “player”, “user”, or “operator”; but more so in that it regards human bodies too as tools or instruments to be used by something like human consciousness or “someone’s mind”. Furthermore, I also argue that corporal accounts of avatars are *dualistic* in at least three regards: first, in that they treat avatars and players (or users or operators) as fundamentally different kinds of entity, and yet do not explain how the alleged interaction of these entities achieves explicitly

¹ I will ultimately argue that this kind of language obscures the ontology of avatars. This parlance is satisfactory, however, for the purposes of this introduction.
embodied activity; second, in that they presume that the division they posit between a player and that player’s avatar(s) is analogous to a division that they also presume to hold between a person and that person’s mind or consciousness; and, third, in that they attribute the motivation, will, or “source” of what they regard as embodied activity chiefly to one side of the division (the player/mind) and view the other (the body/avatar) as a basically passive source of input.

Why focus on ways in which existing studies of MMOGs conceptualize avatars? On one hand, I agree with existing studies that avatars are one of the “features” that make MMOGs substantially different than other forms of computer-mediated interaction (such as email and instant messaging) to which MMOGs have often been thought comparable in virtue of making use of the same underlying hardware, software, and networking technologies. In addition, I also agree with existing studies that understanding avatars – what they are, what they do, how they function, how they contribute – is crucial to the project of understanding MMOGs. On the other hand, however, and quite unlike the studies in question, I am not convinced that we are able to gain adequate insight into the nature and function of avatars by framing this subject in terms of the concepts that existing studies of MMOGs have adopted. As will become clear once the arguments outlined above get underway, I think that assigning some notion of representation a pivotal role introduces several difficulties, and actually explains little of what is interesting about avatars. Thinking of avatars as bodies of some kind hones in on a certain kind of significance that many have supposed that avatars possess, but has (at least to date) also involved committing to some substantial instrumentalistic and dualistic presuppositions. I also find it troubling that existing studies of MMOGs have tended to equate the “difference making” character of avatars with the idea that avatars ultimately enable better or more advantageous or even more human modes of computer-mediated interaction than those to which they have often been compared.

One of the goals of this dissertation is to put the very subject of avatars in question in a more thorough or radical way than has been the norm in existing studies of MMOGs. To this end, in chapter 7, I attempt to reconfigure the basic terms in which avatars are understood by introducing the idea of *conjuncture*. Conjuncture is a term that is intended to provide a (non-instrumentalistic and non-dualistic) way of thinking about how human beings and avatars function together at an existential-ontological level in order to enable MMOGs to be experienced in the ways in which (I argue) they tend to be experienced by those participating in this type of
computer game. Once again, while it would be out of place to attempt to characterize the idea of conjuncture fully here, it is worthwhile to emphasize some of the basic features of this concept:

- The notion of conjuncture that I introduce is, like my conception of virtuality, induced hermeneutically from out of a previous phenomenological analysis that this notion both extends and reflexively puts into question.

- Also like my conception of virtuality, conjuncture is an existential-ontological notion. In part, this means that this idea does not conceptualize avatars only as tools or instruments or representations or even as things of any other kind, but introduces a way of understanding avatars in terms of how they impact, and are impacted by, human existence.

- The notion of conjuncture is intended to communicate the idea of an existential intimacy – a togetherness or a conjoining – between humans and avatars that does not just arise while people actually participate in a MMOG, but that functions as one of the underlying conditions that allow people to participate in a MMOG in the ways in which (I argue) they actually do.

- Thinking about avatars in the way that I propose – a way outside the framework of existing studies of MMOGs – also requires thinking about human existence in a way that does not strictly accord with how it is conceived within the phenomenological tradition that nonetheless (and albeit provisionally) orients this dissertation.

This final point bears special emphasis because it turns out not to be an isolated theme. Rather, what will become apparent, especially as Part 2 of this dissertation progresses, is that the very act of analyzing MMOGs phenomenologically often unsettles the traditional existential-ontological notions that themselves enable this particular analysis to get underway. For this reason, part of what I take to be involved in studying MMOGs phenomenologically is to explicitly examine ways in which the phenomena within this particular region of human experience test, stretch, put pressure on, and perhaps even transcend the boundaries of traditional phenomenological thinking. While some may conceive of this kind of examination as what philosopher’s commonly refer to as an “immanent critique” of phenomenology, this is not how I would frame the purpose of these examinations. In my view, rather, the kind of theoretical reflexivity that I undertake especially in Part 2 of this dissertation – one in which analysis of certain phenomena is guided by concepts that are reflexively put in question by how the phenomena at hand are interpreted – is integral to the kind of phenomenology to which I aim to
stay true. Likewise, while one of the chief merits of the phenomenological approach I follow in this dissertation is its *elasticity* – its ability to shift ground in response to pressures put upon its basic concepts from one direction or another – if there should come a time (in chapter 9, perhaps?) when the approach I take is no longer recognizable as phenomenology, I would consider that an acceptable conclusion. This is one reason why I often refer in Part 2 of this dissertation to phenomenology as a *provisional* method for studying MMOGs.

Describing, at least at a high level, the principal moments when analyzing MMOGs phenomenologically unsettles traditional existential-ontological notions will also help to illustrate what is ultimately at stake in establishing MMOGs as a site of explicitly phenomenological inquiry.

### III

In Part 2 of this dissertation, I begin by arguing that there are grounds for interpreting MMOGs as *worlds*, where this latter term is understood in an existential-ontological sense drawn (at least initially) from Heidegger’s analysis of human existence or Dasein. This argument involves defending the claim that those participating in these games tend to experience MMOGs as concretely familiar environments that are characterized primarily by shared, pragmatic activity not only because Dasein itself is worldly, but because MMOGs, taken as a particular phenomenal region, themselves exhibit structural features (or existentiales) of worldliness: in particular, those of significance and concern.

Following this preliminary interpretation, I broaden the sense in which I conceive MMOGs as worlds by focusing on the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed. I begin by describing the extent to which such locations are typically received in everyday experience as heterogeneous, interconnected domains whose character is shaped over time in part because of purposeful, collective activity. I then argue that there are three reasons for further interpreting such locations as *places* in an existential-ontological sense that recalls Heidegger’s use of the term “Gegenden”: first, because such locations play a substantial role in organizing the systems of apparently useful things found in them; second, because such regions play a substantial role in orienting the collective activities of those participating in MMOGs; and, third, because such locations broadly circumscribe the kinds of interaction it is possible to have in a MMOG, while also leaving room for a great deal of improvisation.
What is at stake in this chain of arguments that takes the spatiality (in a sense discussed in chapter 7) of MMOGs as its main theme? First, with respect to the study of MMOGs, the aim of the opening chapters of Part 2 is to establish that MMOGs can be regarded as worlds in a specifically locational kind of sense – which is to say, as regions where collective activity not only happens, but obtains meaning because of where it appears to take place – because MMOGs are continuous at an ontological level with the nature of Dasein’s Being-in-the-world. MMOGs, or so I argue, are not just “like” worlds, be they “real” or “imagined”, nor do they just share ontic properties in common with “the” world of everyday human concerns. Rather, the view that I defend is that there are inherent existential-ontological reasons for regarding MMOGs as worlds; that doing so is grounded (at least in part) in the Being of these types of game. As such, studying MMOGs from the phenomenological perspective that (at least provisionally) orients this dissertation means attempting to get clearer on how, to what extents, in what regards, and to what ends MMOGs themselves world. It means attempting to systematically understand the worldliness of this particular kind of pragmatic shared environment, and involves treating MMOGs as an existential issue not only because they are “something” that Dasein can encounter in the course of its existence, but because MMOGs exhibit features of that which is as Being-in-the-world without appearing to be in this particular way.

In addition to providing insight into the spatiality of MMOGs, interpreting MMOGs as worlds in the sense that I propose problematizes the phenomenological framework that itself gives rise to this interpretation. In this regard, what is likely to appear to a traditional phenomenological perspective (even at this point in the introduction) as a kind of category error – attributing worldliness in an existential-ontological sense to something non-Dasein – also has the intended effect of providing an opportunity to rethink some of the basic suppositions of Heideggerian phenomenology in general. In particular, my interpretation of MMOGs as worlds draws into question the fundamental-ontological distinction between Dasein and the Being of entities other than Dasein; the idea that Dasein alone discloses world; and the notion that whatever Dasein encounters as “being in space” obtains its place because of the de-severing and directionality of Dasein alone.
Following my initial interpretation of MMOGs as worlds, I focus in chapter 8 on how, to what extents, in what regards, and to what ends the existentiales of *fallenness* and *thrownness* contribute to the worldliness of these pragmatic shared environments. Doing so will both confirm my basic contention that MMOGs are ontologically continuous with Dasein’s Being-in-the-world, while also demonstrating that ontological continuity alone cannot account for the phenomena of MMOGs, and that there are substantial ontological differences that must equally be accounted for in the interpretation of these places. In particular, I argue first that MMOGs facilitate traditional modes of fallenness such as idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity. In addition to this, however, I also argue that the way in which Dasein and avatars function together at an existential-ontological level to discloses MMOGs as worlds enables two new modes of fallenness: what I refer to as *concealing conjuncture* and *ambiguating worldliness*. With respect to thrownness, I argue first that – apparently unlike the case of fallenness – the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars that discloses MMOGs as worlds does not facilitate thrownness, but rather *abates* this particular aspect of Being-in-the-world. However, I also argue that the freedom (once again, understood in an existential-ontological sense) brought about by MMOGs in virtue of this abatement functions by constraining possible ways in which collective activity can come to presence within a MMOG, and thus ought to be regarded as one way in which MMOGs actually extend the fallenness of Dasein.

Like my preliminary interpretation of MMOGs as worlds, my analysis of fallenness, thrownness, and MMOGs puts pressure on several traditional existential-ontological notions. Interpreting MMOGs as places where meaning is both imposed and created by the collective activity of Dasein suggests that MMOGs have what I refer to as *existential weight*: a propensity to impact the human way of Being by enabling Dasein to be worldly in a way that neither strictly accords with the traditional conception of Being-in-the-world, nor simply emancipates Dasein from the kinds of shared limitation that in part characterize its finitude. For this reason, doing justice to the worldliness of MMOGs – making adequate sense of the way in which MMOGs creatively repeat everyday Being-in-the-world – also requires questioning some of the basic phenomenological tenets having to do with place and self-ownership: the nature of Dasein’s Being-in or inhabiting; the relationship between fallenness, thrownness and inauthenticity; and the conditions under which Dasein might be open to an “existentiell [Existentiell] modification” that transforms inauthentic into authentic Being-in-the-world.
Following my analysis of fallenness, thrownness, and MMOGs I focus on what, informally and at a surface level, I refer to as “the death(s) of an avatar” or “an avatar’s death(s)”. After discussing two different kinds of reason for focusing on this particular phenomenon, I argue that what is often experienced by those participating in MMOGs as a death of their avatar is both ontologically continuous with and ontologically different than Being-towards-death, and thus can be conceived as virtual death in the sense of virtuality that I propose in chapter 9. In particular, I argue first that “an avatar’s death(s)” is more than just a possible way in which some entity within-the-world can come to an end, and that what is actually at issue in this phenomenon is a possible way in which Dasein can disclose a world. Next, I argue that “an avatar’s death(s)” is a non-relational [unbezügliche] possibility, but also that it is not an unsurpassable [unüberholbare] possibility (once again, where both of these terms are understood in an existential-ontological sense). Third, I argue that the prevalent attitude that those participating in a MMOG have towards the phenomenon of “an avatar’s death(s)” shares characteristics in common with what Heidegger criticizes as the average, everyday understanding of Being-towards-death.

In addition to providing a way of thinking about “an avatar’s death(s)” that surpasses conception of this phenomenon as “just” something that players (or users or operators) experience now and then while playing a MMOG, my conception of virtual death further tests the boundaries of some of the traditional existential-ontological notions that orient this interpretation. In particular, my notion of virtual death puts pressure on the idea that death has to impend for Dasein only as a unique sort of possibility in order to potentially ground a transition to authentic Being-in-the-world, and that Dasein cannot experience a death that is its own because doing so would involve losing the “thereness” that in part constitutes Dasein’s existence. Virtual death, or so I claim, is a death that does not represent one to one’s self, is not a substitute for one’s own death, and yet is still not the death of another. As such, thinking about the ontological impact of this particular phenomenon also requires thinking about what it means to be a being that has ending as a possible way in which to be, and what is involved in the cessation of one particular way in which Dasein can disclose a world. Contrary to initial appearances, what will become evident through analysis of virtual death is that MMOGs are not only permeated with inauthenticity, and do not simply extend inauthenticity into a relatively new domain of human experience, but also provide shared environments wherein what it actually means to be
and die as Dasein is potentially transformed through the existential intimacy brought about by the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars.

I conclude Part 2 by attending explicitly to the sense in which virtual death is a temporal phenomenon. I begin by describing the manner in which virtual death discloses time as something that those participating in a MMOG have to reckon or deal with, and then I discuss what I believe would be claimed about this manner of time-reckoning from a traditional phenomenological point of view. I then develop my own phenomenological analysis of the temporality of virtual death by arguing that, even while virtual death does disclose time primarily as something quantifiable, it nonetheless exhibits characteristics of what Heidegger refers to as world-time [Welt-zeit] (such as significance, dateability, and sharedness) and, therefore, should be understood as a disclosure of ecstatic-horizonal temporality, rather than of what Heidegger refers to as now-time (which is to say, time whose ecstatic character has been made homogenous through prioritization of the present).

At one level, focusing on the temporality of virtual death provides a basis for better understanding one of the principle ways in which time itself matters for those participating in MMOGs. While issues such as the amount of time people spend playing these computer games, and the length of time it takes to complete certain tasks while playing, are often mentioned both in existing studies of MMOGs and in the media at large, the analysis of time and virtual death that I develop systematically focuses on how time functions as more than a merely calculable phenomenon for those participating in MMOGs. In so doing, this analysis also draws into question one of traditional phenomenology’s basic suppositions about ecstatic-horizonal temporality in general: namely, that reckoning with time as something quantifiable – measuring time primarily in terms of “how long” or “how much” – only permits a derived and “now-centric” reading of time, and blocks access to that primordial temporality [ursprüngliche Zeitlichkeit] that is held to be the basis of the meaning of Dasein’s existence. What the phenomenon of virtual death attests to, or so I claim, is a way of measuring time in its worldly character that, through the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars, may grant a new way of accessing the ecstatic constitution of Being-in-the-world.
In addition, because of the integral connection between the ecstatic constitution of primordial temporality and the ecstatic nature of Dasein’s existence, my analysis of virtual death also provides an opportunity to rethink the traditional phenomenological conception of Dasein’s transcendence. While traditional phenomenology interprets Dasein’s transcendence purely in terms of self-overcoming (stepping beyond itself to a world that is in part constitutive of its own way of Being), analysis of virtual death suggests instead that the creative ontological repetition made possible by the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars enables Dasein to “transcend transcendence” by allowing Dasein to be worldly in a way that is beyond Dasein alone. Rather than taking human existence away from itself, rather than leaving existence fundamentally untouched, and rather than making Dasein less accountable to the time that defines existence, I propose that the temporality of virtuality enables Dasein to be what it is, but precisely by overcoming the limits of its everyday Being-in-the-world. Virtuality, or so I ultimately claim, is an affirmation of existence that transforms existence from within itself because of time.

In order to conclude this introduction, let me return for a moment to the interplay between this dissertation and existing studies of MMOGs. Perhaps more so than in their other accomplishments, existing studies of MMOGs have excelled in showing that what is ultimately at stake in MMOGs is more than can be accounted for by regarding MMOGs as some kind of “mere game”. Broadly speaking, what this dissertation aims to achieve is to take this point further by demonstrating how the analysis of MMOGs must itself be more than just the analysis of what is more than a mere game. Doing justice to the phenomena of MMOGs – striving to account for the characteristic clarity, vagueness, mundaneness, uncertainty, difference and fine-grained specificity of the phenomena that commonly arise while participating in this sort of game – ultimately involves also taking a closer look at the nature of human existence in general. It requires thinking about how human beings exist in the world, how they share tasks and time with one another, and how they simultaneously create and impose meaning on their collective everyday activities. By conducting this phenomenological analysis of MMOGs, I hope to lay some of the initial groundwork for treating MMOGs as such an existential-ontological concern.
Part One: Existing Studies of Massively Multiplayer Online Games

2 MMOGs: Their Character and Impact

Because Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) are a relatively new kind of software application, having become popular in North America and Europe only in the last decade or so, and because MMOGs have only very recently begun to draw significant academic attention in the humanities and social sciences, it is useful to begin by describing at a high level some of the characteristics of MMOGs in general. This high-level description deliberately glosses over complexities that can be properly articulated only once the analysis that will follow is underway.

As I indicated in the introduction, MMOGs are commonly regarded as networked computer applications that tens-of-thousands of people (or more) play simultaneously using characters or avatars to interact with one another and with computer-controlled entities (commonly referred to as non-player characters or npcs) within a game-world that is typically rendered in (or as) 3D. These computer games are played in homes, offices, cafes, and classrooms using readily available computer hardware such as personal desktop computers or laptops, and equally common interface devices such as keyboards, mice, trackballs, gamepads and joysticks. As networked or multiplayer computer games, MMOGs require (ideally broadband) wired or wireless access to the Internet. Such network connectivity is required in order to facilitate the transfer of game-related information (such as what someone is doing at a certain time in the game, where someone is standing, how computer-controlled entities respond to what someone is doing, etc.) to and from each player, and to and from the servers where the host software is installed. Currently, the most well-known MMOG is Blizzard Entertainment’s *World of Warcraft* – a game with a worldwide subscriber base of approximately 11.5 million people.2 Although the following list is by no means exhaustive, other well-known examples of this sort of game include Sony Online Entertainment’s *EverQuest* and *EverQuest II*, CCP Games’ *EVE Online*, Square Enix’s *Final Fantasy XI*, NCSoft’s *Lineage* and *Lineage II*, Turbine’s *Lord of the Rings Online*, and Mythic Entertainment’s *Warhammer Online*.

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Two features differentiate MMOGs from other contemporary computer games. The first is that MMOGs allow a substantially large number of people to play the same networked computer game together simultaneously. This is the sense in which such games are massively multiplayer. In this respect, MMOGs are fundamentally different than single-player computer games – non-networked games such as *Myst* or *Tomb Raider* or *X-Com* for which only one individual is capable of being the active player at any given time for any given instance of the game. In this regard, however, MMOGs are also quite unlike small-scale multiplayer games (such as Real Time Strategy or First Person Shooter games) which typically allow only single-digit or double-digit numbers of people (for example, up to eight, sixteen, or thirty-two) to play together at the same time. What counts as a substantially large number of people – how “massive” an online multiplayer game has to be in order for it to be counted as a MMOG – is not strictly defined, but typically ranges from tens-of-thousands to hundreds-of-thousands of concurrent players, and hundreds-of-thousands to millions of total subscribers. For example, in 2005, computer engineers for *EverQuest* reported that they typically had to support connectivity for 150,000 concurrent players. More recently, in April 2008, publishers for *World of Warcraft* reported that, in China, they had recorded a peak user-base of approximately one million simultaneous players. Although only a subset of total subscribers are typically online at any given time in any particular MMOG, Edward Castronova, one of the first academics to focus explicitly on MMOGs, estimates that the total population of all MMOGs worldwide has likely surpassed 30 million individual subscribers.

A second feature that differentiates MMOGs from other contemporary computer games is that these games tend to endure or continue independently of whether or not any particular individual or group is or is not logged into the game at any given time. This feature can be

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6 I write “tend to endure or continue” because even under normal operating conditions MMOGs are routinely brought offline and made unavailable for scheduled maintenance, bug-fixes, and patching. In other words, it is not as
illustrated best by way of contrast. If someone is playing a single-player computer game such as *Myst*, there is a relatively straightforward sense in which the game “ends” when an individual playing the game closes the *Myst* software application or turns off the computer on which they are playing. Roughly speaking, the state of the game and of this person’s activities within the game are “saved”, and the game enters a kind of “suspension” until someone re-launches the application and, for example, picks up where they left-off or starts the game over from the beginning. It is in this regard that MMOGs do not end when individuals or groups of individuals stop playing: the game itself does not cease when any particular person or group closes the application or turns off their computer(s) – it simply goes on without them. The activities of others playing the game continue unabated (although they might be affected by someone’s absence), some of the things that someone has done while playing the game may be affected while they are “offline”, and the things that they might be disposed to do once they return to the game may change depending on what has happened in their absence. This is the relatively straightforward sense in which MMOGs are referred to as *persistent* online games: although the number of particular people playing a MMOG concurrently may grow or diminish at any given time, the gaming environment in which people play, and the activities of those actually playing, continue regardless of exactly who is or is not logged into the game at a particular moment.

What do people do while playing MMOGs? How does one go about playing this sort of computer game? It is actually quite difficult to answer these questions, for reasons that will become apparent as this dissertation progresses. What is normally said in this regard, at least by way of introduction, typically runs something as follows. People play MMOGs by first creating a character or avatar. Often, players create an avatar by selecting a race, a gender, and a class or set of skills/abilities, and by determining their avatar’s appearance: color and style of hair, color of eyes, height, girth, skin-tone, shape of mouth, length of nose, etc. Once an avatar has been

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7 In MMOGs, racial characteristics and roles are often inspired by recognizable fantasy or science-fiction categories. For example, in *Lord of The Rings Online*, an avatar can be a Hobbit Burglar or an Elven Ranger or a Human Minstrel. In *World of Warcraft*, an avatar can be a Troll Rogue or a Human Mage or a Dwarven Paladin. As per stereotype, Dwarves tend to be short and stocky, while Elves tend to be tall, slim, and graceful.
created and named, the player enters the game-world where they are typically provided a series of introductory quests or missions that teach them how to control their avatar, how to interact with other players, how to complete individual and group activities, how to carry out rudimentary tasks such as buying and selling goods, and how to interact with the benign and hostile npcs they will encounter while playing. Players typically advance in the game by exploring regions further afield, obtaining goods of increasing value, buying and selling items, amassing the currency used in the game, practicing trade-skills (such as tailoring or mining or alchemy), defeating hostile players and computer-controlled entities, completing additional quests, and cooperating with others – sometimes, with many others – in order to overcome particularly challenging obstacles. Advancement in MMOGs is typically open-ended. Even the most experienced, wealthy, or powerful player can usually find something to do that (for good or for ill) will alter their status, renown, reputation, financial, political, or social standing within the game. There is typically no end to these games, and no point at which MMOGs are normally said to have been “won”.  

The preceding description, however, is really only the smallest tip of a very large iceberg. One of the main reasons MMOGs have become increasingly popular, as well as one of the main reasons why they have obtained relatively widespread media attention and nascent academic interest, is because a significant portion of the activity which typically goes on in MMOGs is framed by the kinds of gameplay outlined above, but actually has little to do directly with it. This sort of activity is nearly impossible to enumerate, and tends to become more apparent only once initial acquaintance with a MMOG has been made. In MMOGs, sometimes people just “hang out” with no specific purpose. Sometimes they chat with friends. Sometimes they intentionally make new friends or new enemies. Sometimes they talk with people who remain strangers. Sometimes they stand around bored. Sometimes they dance naked on a bridge. Sometimes they light fireworks. Sometimes they wait for the subway. Sometimes they hold races to see how fast someone can get from one point to another. Sometimes they debate the politics of “the real world”. Sometimes they debate the politics of a game-world. Sometimes they get married.

8 The obvious exception to this general rule is when a company decides to shut-down a MMOG (usually for economic reasons).

9 The referent of the word “they” in what follows is openly problematic.
Sometimes they talk about television shows. Sometimes they get sick. Sometimes they hold
funerals for people who have died “in real life”. Sometimes they just wait for something
interesting to happen (and sometimes something interesting does happen, and sometimes it does
not). Some of the quite average things I myself have done in MMOGs, for example, include:

- Composing love poems for Tserrina Syl’Tor, the computer-controlled ruler of the Tower of
  Frozen Shadow.
- Exiting *EverQuest* while standing on the docks in the city of Qeynos so that I could see the
  sun go down.
- Visiting the City of Mist when I missed my friend who had moved to Dublin.
- Playing *World of Warcraft* with my two nephews who were four and six at the time.
- Selling one of my avatars to help make a down-payment on a “real-world” car.
- Swimming from Auberdine to Feathermoon Stronghold for no particular reason (it took the
  better part of an evening).
- Protesting in support of the rebalancing of melee characters in *EverQuest*.

Because of the variation of, and interconnections among, the activities commonly taking
place in these computer games, it is often said that “massively multiplayer online games have
now become among the most complex and sophisticated online social spaces in existence”.\(^\text{10}\) In
turn, and presumably because of this very complexity and sophistication, MMOGs have been
known to produce effects which reverberate well beyond what would typically be considered the
expected boundaries of a genre of interactive entertainment. In one of the most striking cases in
point, in 2005 in Incheon Korea, Chengwei Qiu, aged forty-one, was sentenced to a term of life
in prison for killing Caoyuan Zhu, twenty-six, apparently because Caoyuan had sold without
permission what reports referred to as a “cyber-weapon” known as a Dragon Sabre – an item
which Chengwei had obtained while playing a MMOG called *Legend of Mir III*, and which
Caoyuan had auctioned online for approximately $870.\(^\text{11}\) Also in Incheon Korea, in June 2005, a

\(^{10}\) Peter Ludlow and Mark Wallace, *The Second Life Herald: The Virtual Tabloid that Witnessed the Dawn of the

\(^{11}\) Cao Li, “Death Sentence For Online Gamer”, *China Daily* (June 2005),
couple were charged with criminal negligence leading to death after their four-month old baby died of suffocation while they were online playing *World of Warcraft*. According to reports, the couple had become so absorbed in their activities within this particular MMOG that they had neglected to check on their daughter for more than five hours. More recently, a similar case of neglect was reported in South Korea as a couple were arrested for causing the death of their three-month old baby girl. According to reports, the father, forty-one, and the mother, twenty-five, had been feeding the baby only one bottle of milk every twelve hours, while simultaneously spending upwards of twelve hours per day occupied by a MMOG called *Prius*. What is likely to appear most perplexing about this case is that the couple had apparently been spending a significant portion of their time in *Prius* raising what both media reports and the parents in question referred to as their “virtual child”.

In one of the first and most widely-reported cases involving MMOGs, on Nov. 21, 2001, Shawn Wooley committed suicide allegedly due primarily to his involvement with the MMOG *EverQuest*. Reports suggested that Shawn killed himself either because a man, posing as a woman by using a female avatar, had tricked him out of a vast sum of the currency valued in *EverQuest*’s game-world; or else because the same player had revealed his lengthy deception after rejecting Shawn’s proposal for an online marriage. Shawn’s mother, Elizabeth, found Sean dead at his keyboard – he had apparently been online for twelve hours straight before typing his final message. Elizabeth Wooley now operates Online Gamers Anonymous (www.olganon.org), a 1500-strong support group that has adapted the twelve-step program of dissertation, all currency is in U.S. dollars unless otherwise noted. This is the case only because the studies referenced in this dissertation themselves take this denomination as the standard.


14 This story was reported first in the online version of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* and later in the online version of the *Washington Post*. Both entries are no longer available. For reference to this article see Martha Irvine, “A Troubled Gaming Addict Takes His Life”, entry posted May, 2002, http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/news/689637/posts (last accessed Aug 10, 2010).
Alcoholics Anonymous in order to assist allegedly compulsive participants of MMOGs with managing what this group refers to as their “addiction” to online gaming.

In a different sort of case, on Dec. 20, 2004, an Australian named David Storey paid $26,500 for an island in the MMOG of *Project Entropia*. In addition to charging a “stopover fee” for other players intending to visit his island either for work or relaxation, Storey’s plan was to develop this territory into a series of beach-front properties which could then be sold back to other participants within this game-world at a substantial profit. What is noteworthy about this case is that Storey was able to recoup his initial investment in less than a year. In so doing, he initiated a kind of land-rush within neighboring parts of this MMOG. In Oct. 2005, for example, another of *Project Entropia*’s properties – a space station orbiting the planet below – sold at an online auction for over $100,000.\(^\text{15}\)

While the rapid growth of what are typically referred to as *Real Money Transfer* (RMT) markets – economies in which people exchange common forms of currency such as U.S. dollars for currency, commodities, properties and services within a MMOG – often strikes people as somewhat bizarre, these markets themselves are not a niche phenomenon. A comprehensive (and often-cited) economic study of *EverQuest* completed in 2001 indicated that participants in this MMOG would be able to earn an average hourly wage of $3.42 by selling platinum (the currency valued in *EverQuest*) on eBay for U.S. dollars.\(^\text{16}\) The rate of exchange between platinum pieces and U.S. dollars in 2001 was thus determined to be approximately 0.0107, higher at the time than that of the yen, the won, and the lira.\(^\text{17}\) Projections based on the number of *EverQuest* subscribers and their average weekly hours-of-play suggested that the market value of production on an annual basis per-participant would be approximately $2000.\(^\text{18}\) In other words, in 2001, the

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\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Ibid.
Gross Domestic Product for *EverQuest*’s game-world, per capita, was estimated to be about equal to Bulgaria’s, and four times higher than China’s or India’s.\(^\text{19}\)

While no comprehensive economic analysis of MMOGs as a whole has yet been carried out, the current market-leader in the worldwide RMT economy, Hong Kong based *IGE*, estimated in 2004 that the RMT market for all MMOGs operating in North America, Europe, and Asia generates over $880 million in sales per-year.\(^\text{20}\) Extrapolating from the same economic principles that guided his analysis of *EverQuest*, Castronova estimates that the total GDP per-capita of all MMOGs taken as a whole has likely surpassed $1 billion USD annually.\(^\text{21}\)

It is apparently not just money that people are willing to invest in the activities taking place within MMOGs, but also time. According to a three-year study completed in 2003, players spend an average of 22.71 hours per-week in their chosen MMOG.\(^\text{22}\) The average age of these people was 26.57 years old, while the range of those surveyed was 11 to 68.\(^\text{23}\) Almost 61% of those surveyed had spent at least 10 consecutive hours in a MMOG on more than one occasion, while 9% had spent 40 or more hours per-week within the game-world of their choosing.\(^\text{24}\) A similar study of *EverQuest*’s population suggested slightly higher numbers: an average of 27 hours per week for people who considered themselves casual players, and 36 hours per week for...

\(^\text{19}\) Ibid.


\(^\text{23}\) Ibid, 18.

\(^\text{24}\) Ibid, 16.
those who considered themselves “residents” of Norrath (the name of EverQuest’s gameworld).\textsuperscript{25} In this latter survey, 20% of respondents categorized themselves as people who actually \textit{live} in Norrath, while 31% of adults (18+) devoted more time to Norrath in a typical week than they did to work (defined as university and/or employment).\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, 22% of these respondents indicated a desire to spend all their time in Norrath, while 40% reported that they would quit their jobs and devote their labour hours to the Norrathian economy if they could.\textsuperscript{27}

Anecdotal evidence provided by what are referred to as raiding guilds further illustrates the extents of time some people commit to MMOGs.\textsuperscript{28} These guilds typically require players to be online for substantial periods of time, usually every day, in order to remain in good standing within the guild. For example, the \textit{Fires of Heaven} webpage indicates that the scheduled raiding times of this guild are “Monday-Friday 6:00pm – 12:00am (or later); Saturday-Sunday: 4:00pm – when we finish” and that this schedule is “non-negotiable” and must be satisfied 95% of the time.\textsuperscript{29} Guild \textit{Afterlife} is equally stringent:

\begin{quote}
We raid every day but Friday and Saturday, usually starting at 6:00pm PST. If you can’t play from that point until after midnight, every day, then AL [Afterlife] isn’t for you. We expect applicants to exceed 90% raid attendance.\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{25} Castronova, \textit{Virtual Worlds}, 25.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 25.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, 22.
\textsuperscript{28} In this context, \textit{guilds} refer to large, organized collections of people who cooperate over an extended period of time in order to socialize and complete activities in a MMOG. A \textit{raid} is an activity that involves a significant number of participants (typically 25-100+) coordinating tasks at the same time. \textit{Raiding guilds} focus on completing the most challenging encounters possible in a MMOG.
\textsuperscript{29} Fires of Heaven, “Application”, \url{http://wow.fohguild.org/applications/FoHApplication.php} (last accessed Aug 10, 2010).
\textsuperscript{30} Pewin, “Join”, \url{http://afterlifeguild.org/join/} (last accessed Aug 10, 2010).
\end{flushright}
**Ensidia** is similar:

Progress raid times are extensive and you must be available to attend all of these raids. Farming raid times are roughly 18:30 till 00:00. During progress you can expect to raid at any hour of the day. We realize this limits the amount of applicants, but it's essential that you’ll be able to free up time for these progress raids that could run for weeks at a time.\(^{31}\)

One telling example of the lengths to which members of guilds such as these commit time to MMOGs was recently provided by a guild in *Final Fantasy XI*. In this case, members of *Beyond the Limitation* spent approximately eighteen consecutive hours, in many cases without taking breaks or even going to the bathroom, attempting to defeat one of the most challenging encounters provided by that particular MMOG. They gave up only after “people started passing out and getting physically ill”.\(^{32}\)

**II**

Broadly speaking, what the preceding reports suggest overall is that many people from many different parts of the world have become seriously invested – emotionally, economically, socially, and temporally – in contemporary MMOGs.\(^{33}\) These games have become a vital part of

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\(^{31}\) Mackzter, “Ensidia is Recruiting the Last Few for Icecrown”, entry posted Jan 25, 2010, http://ensidia.com/article/258/ensidia-is-recruiting-the-last-few-for-icecrown (entry last accessed Aug 10, 2010). The three aforementioned guilds were selected from among well-known raiding guilds. The website WowJutsu (http://www.wowjutsu.com/world/) provides links to the top raiding guilds in *World of Warcraft*. Similar sorts of time requirements are described by many of the top-ranked guilds.


\(^{33}\) Here, it is important to note the *particularity* of this claim. Just as the cases I discussed in the previous section focused only on MMOGs, and did not refer to any other kinds of computer game, let alone anything as broad as “online activities” or “cyberspace in general”, the theses that I defend in this dissertation start out by being similarly particular. It is a basic methodological principle of this work that attempting to defend claims about “computer games in general” (or “online activities” or “cyberspace”) is about as promising as attempting to advance theses about “literature in general” or “philosophy in general” – which is to say, for all but a very select few, not a very promising enterprise.
the everyday cultural landscape of a significant number of people. For this reason alone, it makes sense to take a closer look at the nature of the commitments, priorities, values, and relationships that are developing in connection with this particular kind of networked computer game. Studies of MMOGs that have recently been conducted in academic disciplines such as economics, psychology, media studies, cultural studies, information studies, communications, and law have begun to do just this and, as a result, have made significant contributions to understanding MMOGs and their emerging personal, social, economic, and legal impact.

With that being said, however, the view that I will defend in the remainder of Part 1 of this dissertation is that there is also a need for systematic reflection on several of the concepts that existing studies of MMOGs have applied in their various analyses. While these concepts have been presumed to be relatively well understood and sufficiently well defined, I will argue that they are often more problematic than they have been taken to be, and that they are problematic in ways that often conflict with the actual claims of the studies in which they nonetheless play a central role. Focusing on these issues in particular will be productive in that it will help provide impetus for the explicitly phenomenological account of two pivotal notions – that of *conjuncture*, and that of *virtuality* – that I will develop in Part 2 of this dissertation.
3 Virtual Worlds?

In the academic literature, websites, forums, blogs and media reports focused on this particular subject, MMOGs are often taken to be virtual worlds (just as the items that people acquire in these worlds are generally taken to be virtual goods, and the activities in which people participate are generally taken to be virtual activities). A broad cross-section of examples in this regard should serve to illustrate the extent of this popular and widespread way of thinking:

[Some may claim that] the mere fact that practical virtual reality has moved from glowing green text to a graphical games-based interface does not necessarily imply that anything has happened. I would argue, on the contrary, that these changes make virtual worlds much more immersive and, by deepening the level of social realism, much more like real life, a factor which is in my view quite significant.  

Given the endless malleability of the digital medium, a virtual world can in principle simulate any improvement on the real one imaginable, and not surprisingly, many of the Internet’s earliest virtual worlds tried hard to do just that.

Do we want the laws of virtual worlds to be written by technology companies, whose agendas may not include granting us the freedoms we enjoy in our physical lives? Do we want the courts, which may have limited knowledge and experience of technology to make such a decision for us? Or is there a middle ground, a way for virtual worlds to generate new kinds of governance structures that will take the unique properties of virtual worlds into account

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34 Castronova, Synthetic Worlds, 51.

while at the same time respecting the laws and mores of physical nations.  

MMOGs do not alienate; on the contrary, the games make sense only when people are joined through it (albeit by cooperation or competition). [...] their growing popularity clearly shows that people to whom communication with others comes more and more difficult in the real world, communicate eagerly in a virtual world.

The state action doctrine is the threshold issue in examining the application of First Amendment rights within virtual worlds [...]. The key question is whether MMORPGs are more like community associations, clubs, condominiums, and other private organizations, or do they on the other hand assume a “public function” which satisfies the requirements of the state action doctrine.

Herein have been set forth those rights which are inalienable rights of the inhabitants of virtual spaces of all sorts, in their form henceforth referred to as avatars, in order that this declaration may continually remind those who hold power over virtual spaces and

36 Ludlow and Wallace, *The Second Life Herald*, 3 (see also 8-12, 17, 18, 41, 63, 78, 131, 138 for other references to virtual).


the avatars contained therein of their duties and responsibilities

[...].

Despite the prevalence of referring to MMOGs as virtual worlds or virtual spaces or virtual environments or the like, there is little substantial discussion in existing studies of MMOGs about the sense in which MMOGs in particular might actually be virtual, or of what the term “virtual” might mean such that MMOGs might be “things” of this sort. For example, in “The Laws of Virtual Worlds”, Lastowka and Hunter cite the American Heritage Collegiate Dictionary definition of virtual as “Exist or result in essence or effect, though not in actual fact, form, or name” in support of their claim that,

Virtual worlds are unreal. We mean by this that they are artificial, fictitious, intangible, and invented – one can find these as synonyms for “unreal” in a standard dictionary.

Tim Guest echoes this dictionary definition of the term “virtual” in Second Lives: A Journey Through Virtual Worlds, writing there that,

The word virtual has roots in the power of certain qualities – virtues – and has come to mean possessing essence and effect without possessing form; something not quite physical, but with a measurable impact on the real. True to their name, virtual worlds had begun to have an effect on the real.

In The Second Life Herald, Ludlow and Wallace elect to gloss over the term, often referring to the subject of their book as a virtual world while writing in reference to this term itself only that

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“We call the houses and hot tubs and pets and clown paintings that populate The Sims Online “virtual” because they can’t be held in our hands or occupied by our physical bodies”.\textsuperscript{42}

Although Castronova advocates eliminating the term “virtual” in reference to MMOGs, and although he does conduct a more substantial discussion of the term “virtual” in what he refers to as a “digression” in Appendix A of Synthetic Worlds, there he focuses on the relatively uncontroversial point that the (presumed) virtuality of MMOGs has little to do – either historically, or in terms of the technologies used – with VR (Virtual Reality) systems such as those used in aerospace, military, and medical industries. As Castronova emphasizes, unlike MMOGs, VR applications typically require hardware (such as head mounted 3D displays, motion tracking and eye-tracking devices, omnidirectional treadmills, CAVE Automatic Virtual Environments), and multimodal input devices (such as wired gloves) currently not available to the general public. In addition, as Castronova also emphasizes, the actual lineage of MMOGs has more to do with the development of multiplayer computer games than it does with the research aims of VR founders such as Ivan Sutherland and Jaron Lanier. While this approach suffices to point out the intuitive independence of MMOGs from expensive and generally closeted VR technologies, however, it positively denotes quite little. Describing what the (presumed) virtuality of MMOGs is not does not alone suffice to explain what their (presumed) virtuality itself consists of. When Castronova does define the use that the term “virtual” has in Synthetic Worlds, he also stays at a relatively high-level, writing that “[…] where I use “virtual” in this book, I just mean “rendered by a computer”: a virtual world is a world rendered by a computer”.\textsuperscript{43}

There is also little substantial discussion in which existing studies of MMOGs explicitly position the notion of virtual informing their own research within the context of the vast literature concerning concepts of virtual in general. With respect to this latter literature, I have in mind the kinds of theory advanced by people such as Pierre Lévy, Jean Baudrillard, Michael Heim, or Gilles Deleuze – authors for whom some concept of the virtual plays a pivotal role. But in this respect, there are two related issues. The first is that it is not at all obvious that these two

\textsuperscript{42} Ludlow and Wallace, The Second Life Herald, 63. I discuss this quote further on p.36

\textsuperscript{43} Castronova, Synthetic Worlds, 294. I discuss this quote further on p.36.
different kinds of analysis – one focusing specifically on MMOGs; and the other involving some concept of the virtual *writ large* – even could be brought into contact with one another while maintaining the integrity and purpose behind each group’s respective theoretical interests. In other words, one basic problem here may not just lie in getting two different groups from different backgrounds and with typically different goals and different audiences to talk to one another – it might lie in creating a shared language which would allow them to communicate in the first place. Second, even supposing that some kind of dialogue could be established, it is not clear what the outcomes of such a dialogue would be. Would such a dialogue actually benefit either party? Could it be more than merely superficial? Would studies of MMOGs actually be improved, for example, by considering what Deleuze meant by claiming that “[t]he virtual is opposed not to the real but to the actual. *The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual*”?44 Would understanding the (presumed) virtuality of MMOGs usefully concretize the notion of the virtual at home in Deleuze’s theories? Castronova, for one, apparently considers such attempts at cross-pollination unlikely, referring to Lévy’s conception of virtual, for example, as “linguistic gumbo so dense as to be almost awe-inspiring by itself”.45

For these reasons, it often makes sense to think that, in reference to MMOGs, it is acceptable to take virtual to mean what it almost always seems to mean in discussions involving electronic digital computing technologies in general: namely, that what is virtual is somehow not quite real, or somehow other than fully actual, or something that may have the appearance or characteristic features or effects of reality without actually being real. In the following sections, however, I will argue that there are three problems with allowing what I will refer to as *common conceptions of virtual* to influence understanding of MMOGs.


45 Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 287. I suspect that the underlying sentiment Castronova expresses here is widespread among those studying MMOGs: namely, that discussions of the virtual in general, such as those which became widespread in the 1990s, do not help us understand MMOGs, and are likely to even obscure what is actually going on in these games.
First, it is not clear to what extent MMOGs actually are virtual in any of the senses outlined on the previous page.

To begin with the point that I think has been most clearly established by existing studies of MMOGs: the economies developing within these games are not obviously not quite real or other than fully actual. Even though, by and large, these economies involve the buying and selling of goods, properties, and services that function only within a particular game-world, these economies also depend on these commodities and services having values that most would consider to be as real as any others. Each monetary transaction within a particular MMOG, for example, implies tacit agreement about both how much a particular item is worth, and the value of the currency or item used for purposes of exchange. When there is an abundance of items relative to their demand, the value of such items typically goes down, and when items are scarce but held in high regard, they are normally held to be of higher value than comparatively abundant counterparts. There is nothing inherent in such goods that makes them have particular worth – but this is also arguably true of goods such as cars or chickens or cutlery. Moreover, while individuals are capable of determining in MMOGs the value that goods have for them, no individual can alone determine the value such goods have within the game-world itself. This worth, rather, is determined only over time through the collective creation, discovery, and exchange of goods brought about by people interacting for financial and other reasons.46

Nor is it obvious that the time each person spends participating in a MMOG, or the timing required to carry out both individual and group activities in these games, accords with common conceptions of what is virtual.47 In a MMOG, just as in what is typically referred to as “the real world”, time is intuitively taken to be something limited and limiting, shared, interruptible, at different times urgent, passing, or impending. It is something that is constantly taken into

46 I discuss this point briefly because it has been so thoroughly covered by Castronova and others. See especially Synthetic Worlds, 44-49; Ludlow and Wallace, The Second Life Herald, 61-79; and Castronova, On Virtual Economies.

47 In this dissertation, I use the term “participating” rather than, for example, “interacting” or “being engaged in” a MMOG. I think that this term is more “neutral” than such others in that it does not presume, for example, that one must be engaged by a MMOG, or be actually interacting with others, in order to still be involved in what is going on in these sorts of game.
account in ways that often depend on the particular circumstances, aims, goals and co-
participants involved in the events at hand. There does not seem to be anything not quite real
about the eighteen hours which members of Beyond the Limitation spent trying to defeat the
Pandemonium Warden. Nor does there seem to be anything artificial or pretend about the fact
that it takes approximately eight minutes and twenty-seven seconds to fly South from the
Western Plaguelands in World of Warcraft to Stormwind Keep. Nor does there seem to be
something other than fully actual about the fact that Magmadar – one of the npcs found in a
particular area of World of Warcraft – casts a certain spell every thirty seconds after first being
engaged in combat. To flesh out some further examples in this regard:

• An activity referred to as farming is very common in MMOGs. In this context, farming
  refers to conduct in which someone attempts to obtain the maximum quantity of something
  valuable within a MMOG, in the shortest amount of time, with the least amount of effort.
  What matters first and foremost to those who are farming is efficiency. In order to
determine more or less efficient activities, people “factor” time in the same sorts of ways
that they do when trying to decide among more-or-less efficient opportunities “in real life”.
What has to be done first in order to satisfy one’s goals in the quickest time? Which route
will get someone to their ideal destination the fastest? How long is it going to take someone
to get what they need? How long will it take to sell the goods obtained for profit? There is
nothing that immediately stands out as not quite real about the sense in which time factors
in these sorts of deliberations.

• There are many activities in MMOGs which require a quite intimate and detailed awareness
  of the passing of time to complete effectively. For example, in World of Warcraft, the
warlock class has access to a line of spells called damage over time (DOT) spells: spells
whose total effect is transmitted to a hostile npc over a set duration. Since some of these
spells cancel each other out, since some cannot be used in conjunction with others, since
some gain additional potency while others are in place, and since the duration of different
spells itself often differs, participating effectively as a warlock requires developing a fairly
systematic understanding of how different spells will effect the outcome of an event

48 See p.25.
49 I discuss farming at greater length on p.149.
differently depending on how and when they are used. Intuitively, this does not seem to be any less actual than the awareness of time required, for example, for a chef to cook a decently complex meal, or a painter to mix different shades and hues of color while painting.

- Participating in a MMOG often requires not just knowing what to do at the right time, but actually possessing the ability to perform the right task at just the right moment. The coordination involved in getting this timing right, especially when others are involved, does not seem to be virtual in any of the senses described previously. For example, what is referred to as evaccing (from “evacuating”) is a valuable skill in EverQuest precisely because it depends on a sense of timing that comes mostly with experience.\(^50\) If not everyone is in range when the evacuation happens, not everyone will be saved; if the evacuation happens at the wrong time, it may not be available when really needed; if it happens at roughly the right time but a little early, other members of the group may complain that they could have handled the situation, and now have to trudge back to the place they were evacuated from, or else find something else to do. Timing in this case does not seem to be not quite as real as timing required for many activities in “the real world” – passing the ball in a game of basketball, waiting for other cars at a four-way stop, hitting the right notes while singing a duet.

There is also no clear indication why either the thinking or the affections which typically occur while participating in a MMOG should be regarded as virtual in the senses described previously. There is nothing clearly not quite real about the strategizing, organizing, planning, or evaluating that typically takes place while participating in a MMOG. Nor does it seem accurate to say that the fury, excitement, boredom, frustration, tiredness, etc. which often arises while people participate in a MMOG only has the appearance or characteristic features of real fury, excitement, boredom, frustration, tiredness, etc. without actually being any of these. As a case in point, consider the activity typically known as griefing. Griefing is typically defined as systematic, intentional conduct aimed at harassing, bothering, interrupting or otherwise disrupting the activities of others in a MMOG. Not only is such conduct itself predicated upon

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\(^50\) Evaccing refers to evacuating a group of players from near-certain death typically by using a spell or special ability.
the conviction that it is possible to make another person really suffer through activities in a MMOG, this conduct is normally considered bannable activity (i.e. activity for which someone can be banned from the game-world in question) precisely for the reason that it does actually cause misery enough to prevent those who are its targets from continuing to participate. Similarly, it would be difficult to explain the existence of this sort of conduct by conceiving the apparent pleasure received from “making others suffer” as only having the features of shadenfreude without actually being it. If it is countered that such cogitations and affections are themselves real, but that these arise from conduct in a virtual world, then we are still owed an explanation of how such realities arise from that which has been presumed only to have the appearance or characteristic features of reality itself.

Finally, while it may be said that how people spend their time while participating, how they develop their timing, the activities they pursue, the interactions they have with one another, and the cogitations and emotions they think and feel are – at least in some sense – mediated by different factors in a MMOG, it is not clear that such mediation alone warrants thinking of these as virtual in the sense of not quite real or other than fully actual. For example, in contemporary MMOGs, people often use voice communication software such as Ventrilo or TeamSpeak to speak with one another while conducting quests in a group, planning and executing raids, or discussing guild-related activities such as the admission of new applicants. Does it make sense to conceive these sorts of conversation as virtual? If they are held to be virtual just because they are (in some sense) mediated by software and hardware, then is a conference call among employees to discuss insurance benefits via Skype also virtual? If so, is it virtual in a difference sense? Is any communication that uses VoIP technology virtual? What about other types of conversation which similarly do not take place “face-to-face”? There is a sense in which traditional “telephony” calls could also be thought to be mediated – does this make them virtual too? Virtual in the same or different sense as those which take place in MMOGs? Or, for example, suppose that two people living in the same house are participating in a group together in a particular

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51 In EverQuest, there was a fairly legendary griever named Fansy. It is nearly impossible to read accounts of his grieving activity without getting a sense both of the actual frustration he caused; and the actual joy he took in causing it. The company developing EverQuest actually changed the rules on a particular server in order to prevent Fansy from continuing to grief other players. See Not Addicted, “EverQuest’s Sullon Zek Server Will Never Be The Same”, http://www.notaddicted.com/fansythefamous.php (last accessed Aug 10, 2010).
MMOG. If one of them says something in *Ventrilo* that the other takes offense to, is this person only offended virtually? What if what was said had been yelled from one room in the house to another? Would the apparent lack of mediation or the proximity in this second case mean that the feeling of offense was qualitatively different than that created by the interactions of the two in an allegedly virtual space?

Here, there is also a more basic underlying issue. Appeals to commonsense notions of virtual to explain MMOGs often avoid sounding arbitrary by counterintuitively taking *all* objects, activities, and outcomes of a certain character to be virtual. In other words, they avoid caprice by becoming vast to the point of vacuity. Evidence of this can be found, for example, in the conception of virtual introduced by Ludlow and Wallace (quoted previously on p.30):

> We call the houses and hot tubs and pets and clown paintings that populate *The Sims Online* “virtual” because they can’t be held in our hands or occupied by our physical bodies. But when we look around us, the fact is that virtual goods in a broader sense have these days become rather the norm. From software to movies, mp3 files, online magazines, even the contents of this book are in some sense virtual (you didn’t buy it for the paper and the ink, after all).  

Although Castronova appeals to a different criterion than Ludlow and Wallace – computation rather than non-physicality – he makes the same sort of move in his definition of virtual (also quoted previously on p.30) when he writes,

> […] where I use “virtual” in this book, I just mean “rendered by a computer”: a virtual world is a world rendered by a computer.  

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53 Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 294. Tim Guest sometimes echoes this conception, writing on p.4 of *Second Lives*, for example, that a virtual world is “a computer-generated place, created by real people from all across the world who log on to live other lives online”.
In my view, there is something quite troubling about these sorts of way of proceeding. When thought as “that which is mediated” or “that which is non-physical” or “that which is rendered on a computer” the concept of virtual loses much of its useful specificity. Does it actually enhance our understanding of MMOGs to think of them as virtual in roughly the same sense as the contents of a book? If that which is rendered by a computer is virtual does this mean that the balance of my mortgage is virtual when I view it online? What about the balance of Kreekybonez’s bank account in Norrath? Does this mean that an invitation I send via email only virtually invites my wife to dinner? Does it mean that I have really invited her to a virtual dinner? Are any of these virtual in essentially the same way? Or are they virtual in a different way? We have not been given enough help to really sort out these kinds of question.

Nor is it difficult to raise concerns about each of the particular conceptions of virtual described above. For example, it does not obviously make sense to claim that the sounds I make when communicating with another person in a MMOG via Ventrilo are non-physical – but presumably these sorts of communications are meant to fall under the conception of virtual introduced by Ludlow and Wallace. Is getting my avatar to move by pressing keys on a keyboard non-physical activity? Why should non-physicality be the standard for virtuality anyway? Does such a conception imply that dreams – which could also reasonably be held to be non-physical – are also virtual? If so, are they virtual in the same way as MMOGs? Or in a different way? How are we to decide?

Or, focusing for a moment on Castronova’s definition, while it makes intuitive sense to say that the graphics of a MMOG are rendered (by the graphics processing unit of a computer), it does not make the same sort of sense to claim that the communication protocols which enable interconnectivity and, hence, multiplayer interaction in a MMOG are rendered. Nor does it make intuitive sense to claim – to use Castronova’s own point of focus – that the economies which develop in MMOGs are rendered by a computer. Are these economies not part of a virtual world if they are not rendered by a computer? Do they then supervene on these worlds? Or is their relationship to these worlds of some other kind? Where and how is the time it takes to travel

54 And, for that matter, does this conception help us understand what it means to be the contents of a book?
55 Roughly speaking, “Kreekybonez” is the name of one of “my” avatars.
from the Western Plaguelands to Stormwind Keep rendered by a computer? Once again, we have not been given enough help to sort out these kinds of question.

II

A second problem with allowing common conceptions of virtual to influence our understanding of MMOGs is that such conceptions – by being defined inherently in opposition to reality or actuality – conflict with the way in which MMOGs unsettle binary distinctions, such as those which are often assumed to hold in the case of conceptual pairs such as real/imaginary, genuine/fake, fictional/non-fictional, fantasy/reality, inside/outside, worldly/otherworldly, etc. In this section, I will ground this claim through discussion of two cases in particular.

First, in existing studies, MMOGs are often referred to as “a kind of collective digital fantasy” or as places “where millions of people live out a collective fantasy existence”. The problem with this way of conceiving MMOGs, however, is that what would normally be taken to constitute the fantasy of a MMOG is permeated by elements that would, by contrast, typically be considered real. For example, suppose someone creates an avatar that is not the same gender as they themselves are – someone who is male, for example, creates a female avatar and participates in a MMOG in ways which, to the best of their ability and understanding, exemplify what they take it to be to be “of” the gender of the avatar in question (responding to the female case, concealing that they themselves are male, etc.). This kind of behaviour is reported to take place quite often in MMOGs, and there is, I think, an intuitive sense in which most people would be inclined to call this sort of thing a fantasy. One shortcoming with this way of thinking, however, is that it fails to give adequate due to the sense in which the interactions this person may have while participating are – in an equally intuitive sense – not fictitious or imaginary or make-believe despite perhaps involving a kind of deception. For example, suppose the person in

56 Respectively, Ludlow and Wallace, *The Second Life Herald*, 7; and Castronova, *Exodus to the Virtual World*, 5. I believe that the phrase “collective digital fantasy” was coined by either William Gibson or Neal Stephenson but I have been unable to find this expression in the works of either author.

57 Here, I bypass the issue of whether or not it is possible for an avatar to actually have a gender. This is often assumed to be the case, even though the assumption bears closer scrutiny.
question often ninja loots items from the groups “she” joins.\textsuperscript{58} There are what most people would regard as real consequences to this kind of behaviour – effects which are not imagined, or make-believe, or expressions of a creator’s desires or aims, but which actually influence the opportunities open to the person in question, and effect the reputation they have irrespective of their own beliefs, desires, or imagination. If such behaviour becomes common, it will really become increasingly difficult for “her” to find groups; no well-known guilds will be interested in recruiting “her”; “she” will have an increasingly difficult time selling goods and services to others unless “she” offers them at a cut-rate; ultimately, “she” may even be blacklisted from the game-world as a whole. In this example, the intuitive dimensions of the apparent fantasy in question are permeated and circumscribed by factors which do not appear to be fantasy at all.

A second example should help further illustrate the interpenetration in MMOGs of what would normally be considered fantasy and what would normally be regarded as real. Many people who participate in \textit{World of Warcraft} take the notion of both individual and collective achievement very seriously. For this reason, there are all kinds of websites, forums, bulletin-boards and the like (computer-mediated but nevertheless not obviously internal to the MMOG in question) dedicated to discussing the efficacy of different strategies, tactics, plans, sets of equipment, roles, class-combinations, avatar-enhancements and other factors which may help people gain an edge while participating in this MMOG. Often, these discussions refer to data which has been collected and analyzed by many different people over a period of time, and mathematical formulae which express relationships among different quantities of the data collected. Consider the following example, taken from the website of \textit{Elitist Jerks} (a guild well-known for discussions of this kind):

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Ninja looting} refers to the practice of taking goods and items without the permission of others who may also have a legitimate claim to the goods in question. For example, if a group defeats Magmadar and one warlock loots a pair of Felheart Gloves before the other warlocks in the group have had a chance to say whether or not they would like to be considered for the gloves, these gloves have been “ninja looted”.

Stat Multipliers
While base stats and ratings all stack additively, stat boosting talents and buffs usually stack multiplicatively. This rule applies to stats like strength and stamina, derived values like haste and AP, and even damage multipliers for abilities. To calculate your haste convert your haste rating to a haste value then multiply by the buffs.

The shadow damage part of Scourge Strike is one exception to this rule where the multipliers appear to stack additively.

Examples:
Let's assume I'm a Frost Speced DK with Improved Icy Talons, 200 Haste rating and 2000 base strength. I get 1% melee haste per 25.21 rating, so I have 7.93% haste from that. Assuming I've got frost fever up then I get 20% haste from Icy Talons and 5% from Imp Icy Talons which all stack multiplicatively to give me $1.0793 \times 1.2 \times 1.05 = 1.36$ times quicker attacks or the equivalent of 36% haste from a single source.

If I have the talent Ravinous Dead, then I get 3% more strength so will actually have 2060 unbuffed.

Let's say my Fallen Crusader runeforge procs for 15% more strength, and I hit unbreakable armor for another 10% (soon to be 20%) strength. Then I will have a total of $2000 \times 1.03 \times 1.15 \times 1.1 = 2605.9$ strength. which rounds up for display purposes.

Finally, let my offhand have a Razorice runeforge which is fully stacked on the target (+10% frost damage). If I have the Tundra Stalker (+15% damage against targets with frost fever) and Black Ice (+10% frost/shadow damage) and am in Blood Presence (+15% damage). Then my Howling Blast will have an effective damage multiplier of $1.1 \times 1.15 \times 1.1 \times 1.15 = 1.60$ or do 60% more damage than the base damage.

Ability misses
If a frost strike fails to hit, then you get back 90% of the runic power cost. If a death coil misses you do not.

If a rune using ability fails to hit you get the rune back. (Still need to check whether the grace period changes)

Runeforges
Runeforges with a PPM appear to have the same PPM when used in the offhand. Using the same Runeforge on both weapons while dual wielding still only applies a single buff.

Cinderglacier is a 1.5 PPM enchant. It puts up 30 second buff with the same name and 2 charges. Blood Boil, Icy Touch, Death Coil and any Scourge Strike will consume a charge of the buff. Death and Decay, diseases and appropriate weapon procs will be buffed by the damage but not consume a charge. Icy Touch using the last charge will still buff the ensuing frost fever.

Razorice is either a high PPM enchant or has a flat rate. In 3.3.3 it will be applied by every attack. It has 2 effects, one called Razor Frost that does 2% of your mainhand weapon damage as frost damage (around 10 damage), the other provides a stacking buff called Frost Vulnerability that buffs your frost damage by up to 10% for 20 seconds. In 3.3.3 it will stack 5 times at 2% which currently it's 10 times at 1%.

Fallen Crusader is a 2.0 PPM enchant. The buff is called Unholy Strength buffs your strength by 15% and lasts 15 seconds.

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Or, as a second example, consider the following post by Ghostcrawler, Lead Systems Designer of World of Warcraft:

**Figure 2: Armor Penetration Discussion**

Okay, here is a fairly technical explanation we put together for how armor pen works.

We didn’t want Armor Penetration Rating to be too powerful against low armor targets, like it had been in BC. We also didn’t want Armor Penetration Rating to be too powerful against high armor targets.

So, we decided on a system where there is a cap on how much armor the Armor Penetration Rating can be applied to. So, the first X armor on the target is reduced by the percentage listed in the Armor Penetration Rating tooltip, and all armor past that X is unaffected. Another way of understanding that is we multiply the percentage in the tooltip times the minimum of the two values: the cap, and the amount of armor on the target after all other modifiers.

Computing the cap is a little tricky unless you are already familiar with how World of Warcraft armor works. There is an armor constant we’ll call C. C is derived as follows (in some pseudocode):

```pseudocode
If (level<60)
    C=400+85*targetlevel
Else
    C=400+85*targetlevel+4.5*85*(targetlevel-59);
```

For a level 80 target, C=15232.5. For a level 83, C=16635.

The cap for Armor Penetration then is: \((\text{armor} + C)/3\).

A level 80 warrior creature has 9729 armor. C=15232.5. So, the cap is \((9729+15232.5)/3=8320.5\). Let’s say a player has 30% armor penetration from armor penetration rating and no other modifiers that complicate the calculation (talents, Battle Stance, Sunder Armor, etc.). The game chooses the minimum of 8320.5 and 9729, so 8320.5. That is multiplied by 30% = 2496.15, and so that much armor is ignored. The effective armor on the target is 7232.85 (9729-2496.15). From a player point of view, the armor penetration rating didn’t ignore the full 30%, but instead ignored 25.66%. (85.5% as effective as expected).

These equations should help you be able to test and verify that Armor Penetration Rating is working correctly and as we designed. The tooltip is not actually inaccurate, as it states: “Enemy armor reduced by up to 30.00%.” That "up to" is key.

Please be sure to test without any other effects which modify the armor calculation (Battle Stance, Sunder Armor, Mace Specialization, etc.) as they may involve other systems that add additional complexity to the calculation.

At one level, and in an intuitive sense, it does make sense to regard discussions such as these as referring to some kind of fantasy. Icy Talon spells and Scourge Strikes and Armor Penetration and the like? It all certainly sounds pretty fantastical. However, I also think that it is equally counter-intuitive to regard the data which is the subject of these kinds of deliberation, the

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calculations which are used to derive the data, the formulae which are deduced from data-
analyses, and the heuristics which evolve from understanding the formulae fantasies or
fantastical in the same intuitive sense. They would rather seem to be aspects of, or elements
derived from – for lack of a better phrase – “the way things actually are” with respect to a
particular MMOG. If the MMOG in question was different, so too would be the calculations
discussed by Ghostcrawler; but if these calculations were different, then so too would be the
game-world in question. To be clear, the issue here is not that the sorts of deliberations discussed
in the previous examples are just complicated and well-developed (traits which, of course, could
also be said to hold for certain types of clear-cut fantasy). Rather, the issue is that the
correspondences between the analyses which sometimes happen and the events from which data
is drawn; the conclusions which are often induced from such analyses (for example, that Armor
Penetration is more useful against well-armored targets than it is against poorly-armored targets);
as well as the practices which arise from these conclusions (for example, that Warriors, in fact,
tend to focus on obtaining items which increase Armor Penetration; unless they are fighting
Mages, in which case they tend to focus on obtaining more haste) do not map on to what it
normally makes sense to regard as imaginary or make believe or illusory or unconstrained by
reality – as fantasy in its normal, everyday senses. Here, as in the previous case, MMOGs
unsettle what is generally taken to be the mutually exclusive condition of either being real or
being fantasy. And so referring to them as either one or the other automatically does disservice to
the particular character of these games.

A second case in which MMOGs unsettle what is often assumed to be a binary distinction
has to do with conceptions that rely on determining what counts as “inside” and what counts as
“outside” a MMOG. This is perhaps most evident in cases involving the idea that what goes on
in a MMOG takes place, or ought to be regarded as taking place, within a magic circle of some
Here, I focus on three widespread ways of thinking about MMOGs that have tended to rely on some notion of a magic circle.

It is sometimes claimed that the main reason why apparently violent (or sexually deviant or slanderous, etc.) activities among those participating in a MMOG are not, and indeed ought not be, actionable by law is because these activities take place within a magic circle – here understood as a space governed by its own set of rules, distinct from “the real world”, in which people consent to forms of conduct that often involve acts to which they would not normally consent. Here, obviation of the normal, expected legal ramifications of conducting oneself in a particular way is assumed to be a condition for consent, and an enabling feature of participating in a MMOG in general. Within such a magic circle, it is held, one person may, for example, draw a blade and kill another person’s avatar without worrying about possibly being charged with murder, in much the same way that one person may strike another person with their shin during a sanctioned kickboxing competition without worrying about being charged with assault. Here, appealing to an idea of a magic circle is intended to make sense of our intuition that it is indeed rational and in keeping with the “spirit” of the law to not count such behaviour illegal.

A concept of the magic circle also often plays a central role in economic concerns involving MMOGs. For example, the current norm (at least in North America and Europe) is for people not to be taxed on ownership or transfer of what are typically referred to as “virtual goods” – items such as Dragon Sabres and Cinderglacier Runes and Felheart Gloves and the like. Even while such items may indeed possess an exchange value which can be denominated

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61 Although the term “magic circle” is often (and correctly) attributed to Huizinga, its contemporary application in computer game theory has more to do with Salen and Zimmerman’s appropriation of the concept in their book Rules of Play. See Johannes Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), esp. 10; and also Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, Rules of Play (Boston: MIT Press, 2003) 95-96.

62 Each of these ways of thinking (and several others) are usefully outlined in relation to MMOGs in Joshua A.T. Fairfield, “The Magic Circle”, Vanderbilt Journal of Entertainment and Technology Law, vol. 11:4 (2009):823-840, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1304234## (last accessed Aug 10, 2010). Note that although Fairfield is himself critical of applying the magic circle to studies of MMOGs, and despite surface indications to the contrary, the reasons Fairfield has for his criticism of the notion are different than my own reasons for wanting to suspend the use of this term. In particular, and for reasons I discuss on p.51ff, I take issue with what Fairfield refers to as “the thrust of his argument […] that there is no “real” world as distinguished from “virtual” worlds”. See Fairfield, “The Magic Circle”, 825.

63 This norm, however, is currently under review. In 2008, China introduced a 20% personal tax levy on the sale of such goods and forms of currency.
in terms of, for example, U.S. dollars, the claim is that it makes sense not to levy a tax against such items because they are obtained and usable only within the magic circle of a particular MMOG. Within such a space, it is claimed, the normal rules of taxation ought not to apply – much in the same way that it would not make sense to tax properties or items obtained, for example, during a game of Monopoly.

One particularly widespread criticism of the RMT market also often appeals to a concept of the magic circle. Here, the basic claim is that trading funds such as U.S. dollars for “in-game” items, abilities, or currency disrupts the integrity of the magic circle in which a MMOG should operate. In permitting “real world” economic factors (such as one’s disposable income, and one’s access to relatively fair and secure forms of payment such as eBay or PayPal) to influence the economic activity of a MMOG, the RMT market allegedly compromises what a MMOG ideally is – a separate, autonomous system, free from the economic constraints and advantages afforded people in “the real world”. In this case, a concept of the magic circle serves to provide a kind of model or standard, and any activity which undermines the alleged independence of a MMOG is judged to be deleterious to the extent that it prevents this ideal separation.

In my view, however, the basic problem with these (and other) applications of a notion of a magic circle is that the utility of this concept requires being able to reliably determine, at least in a significant number of cases, what counts as “inside” and what counts as “outside” a MMOG. But it is exactly this kind of determination that MMOGs unsettle. Since so much of what might be held to be “inside” a MMOG could also, at the same time, and with equal sense be held to be “outside”, and vice versa, the traditional assumption which supports claims about the magic circle – namely, that “inside” and “outside” are descriptions of one of two mutually exclusive states – starts to unravel when brought into contact with MMOGs. In this context, traditional notions of “inside” and “outside” cease to function as reliable coordinates for understanding. And if one reverts to the idea that the practices, goods, communications, etc. commonly arising

64 I define RMT on p.22.

65 This view often underlies the criticism that game developers themselves level against RMT markets.
in connection with MMOGs are both “inside” and “outside” the magic circle, it is difficult to see how this concept could retain much theoretical weight.

Consider, for example, popular graphical user interface (GUI) modifications such as AtlasLoot or QuestGuru. On one hand, these modifications allow those participating in World of Warcraft to search databases of content not stored on Blizzard Entertainment’s own servers, and to receive player-created (rather than developer-created) instructions and waypoints for completing quests efficiently. But, on the other hand, the waypoints and instructions which are communicated to players only appear as actual elements of the game-world in which this MMOG takes place, and the particular way in which players follow these waypoints and instructions only come to be defined while players play this game. Are these kinds of GUI element “inside” or “outside” the MMOG in question? Are they both “inside” and “outside”? And – to speak more generally – does the magic circle of this particular MMOG extend to the World of Warcraft GUI as a whole, or only to that which the GUI might be said to provide access to or information about?

Or, for example, consider latency and MMOGs. Here, I use the term latency, very roughly, to refer to the delay between the transmission and receipt of data over a distributed communication system such as the Internet. On one hand, latency can often be straightforwardly attributed to the local network that players use to connect to a particular MMOG. But, on the other hand, players with low-latency connections will often obtain tangible in-game benefits from being able to send and receive data with lower delays. Is latency, then, “inside” or “outside” a MMOG? How is this to be determined? At the extreme end of the scale, is being disconnected from a MMOG due to extended periods of high-latency (going link-dead, as it is commonly called) something that happens “inside” or “outside” the magic circle of this kind of game? On one hand, being link-dead means, by definition, no longer being able to participate in the MMOG in question – being, as it were, “cast out” of the magic circle. But, on the other hand, the cessation of one’s ability to participate because of link-death may in fact effect the outcome of what is happening (as it would normally be said) “inside” the game in question.

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66 This is why raiding guilds often impose minimum bandwidth and connectivity restrictions upon members.
Nor is it difficult to provide other illustrations of the destabilizing effect of MMOGs. Is the iPhone application that Blizzard Entertainment released in 2010 – one that allows players not only to track their avatars, plan guild activities, and check guild rankings, but also to actually buy and sell goods via a mobile handheld device – “inside” or “outside” *World of Warcraft*? What about *EverQuest II*’s web-browser, or the “/pizza” command which allows people to launch directly into the Pizzahut.com online ordering system from the MMOG in question? Is using 3rd party voice communication software such as *Ventrilo* “inside” or “outside”? Is it different if someone uses, for example, *World of Warcraft*’s own voice activation software? Are duels in *World of Warcraft* which arise because of disagreements about reasons provided for the 2003 invasion of Iraq “inside” or “outside”? What about racist or homophobic slurs? What about racist slurs which refer to the races of a particular MMOG? What about the harm these potentially cause? What about the sexual gratification that some people experience while playing MMOGs? What about the friendships which are often reported to arise as a result of playing?

To be clear, my claim here is not that it is impossible to answer these kinds of question, at least on a case-by-case basis, but that the answers provided are likely to appear arbitrary because the schema upon which they are normally taken to depend – one in which it is possible to establish for the most part that what is “inside” is not “outside”, and that what is “outside” is not “inside” – is itself unsettled by the kinds of game here in question. In this respect, it is important to distinguish the claim I am making from two claims for which it could sensibly be mistaken.

First, the claim I am attempting to articulate is different from the *quantitative* argument that MMOGs allow relatively more transit from “outside” to “inside” and from “inside” to “outside” – or that the “inside” tends to effect the “outside” and the “outside” the “inside” more – than is normally thought to be the case for activities taking place within a magic circle. My view, rather, is that MMOGs tend to destabilize the traditional conceptual pairing that is used to make sense of such passages or transferences. This is why I would also resist referring to MMOGs as taking place within an “almost-magic-circle” or a “porous membrane”. Such expressions would be an improvement on traditional conceptions of the magic circle if the issue

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lay only in identifying the *extent* to which elements from one domain passed into or effected another. My claim, however, is that treating MMOGs as a domain distinct from, and yet containing elements of or being effected by, what would normally be referred to as “the real world”; and, by extension, that treating “the real world” as a domain distinct from, and yet containing elements of or being effected by, what would normally be referred to as “virtual worlds”, is itself the approach that MMOGs unsettle (at least insofar as conceptual pairs such as virtual/real and inside/outside are conceived in a basically binary way).

Nor is the claim that I am making an issue of dealing with many marginal cases. Many activities which could feasibly be held to take place in some kind of magic circle have to deal with marginal cases such as ones in which it is not immediately clear whether or not what has taken place is “inside” or “outside” a magic circle. By and large, however, these marginal cases serve mostly to reinforce the boundaries held to distinguish what goes on in a magic circle from the activities of everyday life. To put it simply, their exception often helps to prove the rules. In this respect, however, I am claiming that MMOGs are quite different. My view is that the notion of some activities taking place at the margins also tends to lose traction in relation to MMOGs. The lack of clearly defined “core” activities in terms of which marginal cases could be assessed; and the lack of boundaries in terms of which transgressions would normally be defined unsettle how we are even meant to understand the alleged separation of MMOGs from the everyday world. Here, my claim is that what is happening is not that boundaries are being blurred by many marginal cases, but that the boundaries which would normally be thought to hold between MMOGs and “the real world” tend not manifest with definition enough to grant the kind of separation which undergirds common notions of “inside” and “outside”.

This, then, is the second reason I maintain that common conceptions of virtual ought not influence our understanding of MMOGs. Insofar as such conceptions rely on a binary way of conceiving differences among each element of a supposed conceptual pair, they conflict with the way in which MMOGs themselves disturb the idea of actually being, for example, *either* of one order of being (“fantasy”) *or* another (“reality”); *either* in one state (“inside”) *or* another (“outside”); or *either* existing in fact (“actually”) *or* existing only in effect (“virtually”).
III

The third reason I have for holding that common conceptions of virtual ought not influence understanding of MMOGs is because these conceptions might ultimately prove dangerous both for theory and in practice. Let me explain.

According to a long-standing philosophical tradition, the difference between something real and something non-real ought to be understood as a lack or deficiency on the part of the latter. This tradition would maintain that, qua virtual worlds, MMOGs are themselves lacking or deficient simply in virtue of being virtual. Although he likely does not have MMOGs specifically in mind when he makes the following assessment, Siegfried Schmidt provides a paradigmatic expression of this kind of thinking applied to the notion of virtual worlds in general. In “From Aura-loss to Cyberspace”, he writes,

Virtual worlds, just as they open technical cyberspaces, embody thereby an instructive paradox: they strive, on one hand, for the most complete reproduction possible and, on the other hand, for a complete liquidation of the real. Purely audio-visual surfaces have beginnings and ends only coincidentally, for they are detached from the meaning of objects and from history; indifference or aesthetic fascination correspond to them as modes of perception, but not a processing of reference.

Common conceptions of virtual, which inherently encourage an oppositional stance towards that which is defined in opposition to the real or the actual, both assent to and reinforce this manner of critique. For this reason, conceiving of MMOGs as virtual in any of the common senses of this term makes it difficult to even take seriously the idea that there might be genuine, meaningful, historically significant, ethically and politically charged activity going on in these sorts of game. To see why this is a problem, consider the following two cases.

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68 For simplicity, I refer to this as a tradition even though it could also be conceived as a theme which runs through several traditions.

Reports of people falling in love and marrying in a MMOG have received relatively widespread attention in the past five years.\textsuperscript{70} If the presumed virtuality of MMOGs is uncritically taken to mean that these places are less than real, then it is likely to seem that such relationships (at best) involve the union of two ultimately fictional agents (avatars rather than “real” human beings); or that (at worst) this sort of union may even threaten to “liquidate” (to use Schmidt’s expression) the significance of marriage itself – perhaps first and foremost for those directly involved, but perhaps also for the society in which this sort of activity has begun to take hold. The danger with this way of framing the event, however, is that it does not allow us to take seriously the idea that there might be a commitment involved in this practice that does not “begin and end only coincidentally” (ibid), but which has genuine personal-historical meaning for those who have married in this particular way. Why call it marriage? Why an exchange of rings and vows? Why witnesses? Why a ceremony at all? Why this particular kind of ceremony? Why assent to some kind of tradition in the first place? These are questions that need to be at least taken seriously. But common conceptions of virtual predispose analysis to regard these questions primarily in terms of the presumed deficiency of the event at hand.

Second, consider a specific case of griefing that also received relatively widespread media-attention.\textsuperscript{71} In 2006, an apparently well-known and liked player of World of Warcraft whose in-game name was Fayejin died (as would be said) “in real life” from a stroke. Her guild and a number of other players she had met online held an “in-game” memorial for her in a place called Winterspring. Because Winterspring is so-called contested territory – an area in which players of World of Warcraft are free to attack one another – and for other reasons which are not entirely apparent, a rival guild called Serenity Now ambushed the funeral service \textit{en masse} and slaughtered the approximately fifty mourners in attendance.\textsuperscript{72}


\textsuperscript{71} I define griefing on p.34.

\textsuperscript{72} A video of the attack including (vociferous) comments from other players following the attack is available at MesterMide, “Serenity Now - Crash a Funeral - High quality”, YouTube, uploaded Dec 28, 2008, \url{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgXW-cKl1bw} (last accessed Aug 10, 2010).
Allowing common conceptions of virtual to frame understanding of this event introduces (at least) two closely related dangers. A danger for theory is that we might fail to recognize genuinely aprobative behavior for what it is and, hence, be unable to adequately theorize this event as a real ethical concern. If the funeral service was “only virtual” in the sense of less than real or (to once again use Schmidt’s expression) “detached from the meaning of objects and from history” (ibid), then it might seem that the attack on this funeral in turn does not ultimately matter; that there was nothing really much at stake here in the first place. Not only does this view, however, seem to sidestep what is intuitively vexing about this attack (Why do it if there was nothing really at stake? Was it enjoyable? Did those who attacked the funeral ever come to regret their actions?), it also makes it difficult to account for the shock and indignation which generally followed reports of this event.  

A corresponding danger for practice is that people might be prone to engage in this kind of conduct because they do not recognize any normative gravity of conducting themselves in such a way. If attacking a memorial service in a MMOG is “only virtual” in the sense of less than real, then it is perhaps not difficult to justify an attitude of indifference towards such an event. In contrast, however, I think we need to be able to at least take seriously the idea that acting in this kind of way is something for which people should take themselves to be accountable. Here, common conceptions of virtual are dangerous because they encourage the idea that taking part in such events can be done without making any “real” ethical commitments one way or another.

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73 It is worth noting that Serenity Now faced quite serious repercussions in World of Warcraft for this attack. Members of the guild were generally blacklisted regardless of whether or not they had actually participated in the attack.
So far in this chapter, then, I have argued that there are three problems with allowing common conceptions of virtual to influence understanding of MMOGs:

1. It is not clear to what extent MMOGs are virtual in these senses;
2. These concepts conflict with the way in which MMOGs unsettle what are usually taken to be binary distinctions; and,
3. These concepts might actually prove dangerous both for theory and in practice.

As I indicated in the introduction, however, the underlying aim of these arguments is not to repudiate the studies in which such conceptions of virtual play a role, but rather to expose a tension that often manifests within these studies themselves. Broadly speaking, those who have been studying MMOGs in disciplines such as economics, psychology, media studies, and law would by and large agree that there are significant problems with allowing common conceptions of virtual to influence understanding of MMOGs. In this respect, however, there are two related issues:

- In practice, as the cross-section of examples provided on p.27 attests, existing studies of MMOGs have tended to rely on some notion of virtual to do real work, at least at an intuitive level, of communicating what these studies themselves take to be something important and decisive about MMOGs. Because these studies also tend not to focus on the term “virtual” at much length, and do not to relate the study of MMOGs in particular to systematic, theoretical analyses of the virtual writ large – preferring instead to bypass such theorizing in order to focus immediately on the games in question – they have not done enough to actually dissuade such uses, and even tend to fall back on common conceptions of virtual when applying the term in their own works. For this reason, there is often a palpable tension between the actual research aims of these studies (which do sometimes include rejecting common conceptions of virtual), and their largely uncritical circulation of expressions that tend to invoke the very notions to which they do not want to be beholden. In these studies, even calling MMOGs “virtual worlds” inadvertently serves to sometimes undermine the actual claims that these studies have wanted to make.
In addition, when this issue has become apparent to those studying MMOGs, they have tended to respond with solutions that I think are both intuitively unsatisfying and philosophically problematic: typically, by claiming either that what is (apparently) virtual is just as real as what is (apparently) real; or by claiming that what is (apparently) real has been, or will soon be, transformed to accommodate what is (apparently) virtual, effectively making the (apparently) virtual and the (apparently) real out to be one and the same. In this respect, these studies have by and large hoped to validate (perhaps even vindicate?) the study of MMOGs as virtual worlds by assigning these games the same sort of “status” that they have presumed (and that is typically taken) to hold for that which is simply real. In my view, not only does this way of thinking inadvertently reinforce a supposition that often underlies the very criticisms of MMOGs that such studies have been trying to defuse, it also leads directly to some quite troubling overall conclusions (a few of which I will discuss on p. 57).

The clearest expression of this conceptual bind manifests in Castronova’s work on MMOGs. On one hand, Castronova is clearly aware of the problems of allowing common conceptions of virtual to influence understanding of MMOGs. He often draws attention to these issues in general, and what he perceives to be the inadequacy of common conceptions of virtual is one reason he advocates referring to MMOGs not as virtual worlds but as synthetic worlds. For example, in Appendix A of Synthetic Worlds Castronova writes,

> While there is already vast literature on the word “virtual”; we don’t need to access it further to recognize that the conceptual step of assuming that computer-generated content has less actuality, less genuineness than content from the “real world” was a mistake.\(^{74}\)

This recognition, however, serves primarily to foreground two related problems. First, although he originally introduces the term “synthetic worlds” as a replacement for “virtual worlds”, not only does Castronova himself, in practice, often continue to refer to MMOGs (for example) as “practical virtual reality spaces” or “decently immersive virtual reality spaces”, he ultimately

\(^{74}\) Castronova, Synthetic Worlds, 288.
ends up treating his phrase as what he himself refers to as a “synonym” for “the more popular *virtual worlds*”. Moreover, even while Castronova again advocates suspending the term “virtual” in favor of “synthetic” in his follow-up *Exodus to the Virtual World*, in this latter book he also reverts (even in the title) back to the expression “virtual worlds” just as he admits on p.223 of the book to using the terms “virtual” and “synthetic” interchangeably. This might be regarded as “merely” a textual oversight or limitation (if such can be said to exist) were it not for the fact that Castronova’s own conception of the synthetic is prone to many of the same issues which trouble common conceptions of virtual.

Consider Castronova’s two explicit formulations of his expression “synthetic worlds”:

The subject of this book is a generic “synthetic world”, by which I mean any computer-generated physical space, represented graphically in three dimensions that can be experienced by many people at once.

While there might be a number of useful new terms [for referring to MMOGs], I will stick primarily with *synthetic worlds*: an expansive, world-like, large-group environment made by humans, for humans, and which is maintained, recorded, and rendered by a computer.

Here, it is not difficult to put pressure on Castronova’s definition of synthetic by raising similar sorts of questions as those which arise in connection with common conceptions of virtual:

- To what extent are MMOGs actually *generated* by a computer? Is the time each person spends participating in a MMOG, or the timing required to carry out both individual and group activities generated by a computer? What about the thinking and affectations

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75 Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 27. Reference to MMOGs as “practical virtual reality spaces” or “decently immersive virtual reality spaces” or just “virtual worlds” can also be found, for example, on Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 4, 5, 6, 27, 51, 65, 72, 148, 294.

76 Castronova, *Exodus to the Virtual World*, 223.

77 Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 22.

78 Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 11.
involved in participating? Does this definition mean that, for example, the conversations people conduct in a MMOG are generated by a computer? Or does it mean only that these conversations are, in some sense, computerized? If the latter, are these conversations computerized in the same way as other forms of Internet-enabled chat? Or in a different way? In what sense is a MMOG a computer-generated *physical* space? What is it that is physical about them? And how would this suffice to define these worlds in particular?

- In what sense are synthetic worlds “world-like”? Does this mean that they are not, after all, “actually” or “really” worlds but only *like* them? There is, of course, a long-standing philosophical tradition that would hold that being similar to something or being like something requires exactly *not* being that thing itself. Does this notion of being “world-like” thus possibly subordinate the synthetic to the real in much the same way as is commonly thought to hold for the virtual and the real?

- It is commonly held that what is synthetic is artificial, and that what is artificial is somehow fake or unnatural. As such, does using the term “synthetic” in this context offer a substantial improvement over common conceptions of virtual? Are those who marry in a MMOG synthetically married – which might be taken to mean only artificially married? Is this union itself synthetic? If so, how is this kind of synthetic union different from any marriage – understood as a voluntary condition “made by humans, for humans”?

In *Exodus to the Virtual World*, Castronova revisits his notion of the synthetic, defining synthetic worlds there as,

> [W]orlds inside computers, completely designed and constructed by human beings […] crafted, constructed, artificial.79

But it is not clear that this second definition does much better:

- If MMOGs are “worlds inside computers” *where* exactly are they? Are they inside the case? Distributed across a hard-drive? On (or is it in?) memory? What about the data that is sent and received across an Internet connection while playing? Is this also to be counted as “inside”? Is it *my* computer these worlds are inside? Everyone’s? If I am participating in a

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MMOG am I also inside my computer in some sense? It is not clear how we are meant to go about answering these sorts of question, or even whether these sorts of question are ones we should be raising.

- Even while, at an intuitive level, referring to MMOGs as completely designed, crafted, and constructed by human beings (at least arguably) points to a defining difference between MMOGs and “the real world”, I am not sure that Castronova himself would actually find this definition compelling. For example, consider practices such as kiting or quad-kiting which developed over-time in MMOGs quite independently of the intentions of game-designers. It would be incorrect to refer to such practices as artificial, and strange to refer to such practices as constructed or crafted unless this meant little more than “involving human beings”. As a form of customary behaviour that evolved over time without specific direction or articulation, and without being due to any particular individual, group, or set of groups, it is hard to make sense of what it would mean to call such practices “constructions”. Moreover, while it does make intuitive sense to refer to, for example, the cities, roads, towns, and swords which are typically found in MMOGs as constructed or crafted, it makes equal sense to refer to the cities, roads, towns and swords of what would normally be referred to as “the real world” as constructed too. If the issue here is that the type or manner of construction constitutive of MMOGs differs at some level from “the real world” – say, because of the materials used or the manner in which constructions are built – then this would still have to be shown to be something capable of decisively defining MMOGs. Once again, it is not clear how the conception of synthetic at hand is meant to enhance understanding of the games in question.

Second, even when Castronova appears to avoid the problematic legacy of common conceptions of virtual, he does so in a way that I think inadvertently reinforces a supposition that

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80 I write “arguably” here because there are those who would claim that reality itself is a construction of some kind. In fact, on p.12 of Exodus to the Virtual World, Castronova himself (citing Baudrillard and Shakespeare) seems to adopt a constructivist sort of position, assenting to the idea that “society itself […] is best thought of as a kind of virtual reality environment. The cultural world is a construct”. If so, how is the definition of MMOGs in question meant to differentiate them from “the world” in general? If the definition is not meant to do this, how does it help? For concerns about referring to MMOGs and “the real world” as one and the same, see p.55.

81 “Kiting” refers to using ranged attacks to kill hostile npcs in a way that ideally prevents those npcs from harming the player. “Quad-kiting” refers to a specific kiting technique involving ranged area-of-effect attacks on a group of (four) hostile npcs which has been gathered for the purposes of kiting.
often underlies the very criticisms of MMOGs he is trying to get away from: namely, that it is first and foremost *that which is real* that is genuine, valuable, significant, worth studying, effectual, important; and that anything that is *non-real* is not genuine, less valuable, significant, worth studying, effectual, important. For example, on p.148 of *Synthetic Worlds* Castronova writes that (my emphasis),

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When a society in cyberspace holds that a certain glowing sword is really and truly magical, in the sense of having great and extraordinary powers, that judgment is not only impossible to deny within the membrane, but it starts to affect judgments outside the membrane too. By this process, virtual things become real things; when most people agree that the thing has a real value to somebody, it genuinely does have that value. *It is not virtual at all any more but real and genuine.*
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Castronova follows this passage by further stating that,

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I would argue that these processes of value creation have advanced so far, even at this early date, that almost everything known as a “virtual” commodity […] is now certifiably real. […] At first it may have been convenient in many ways to think of networked human interaction as only a model of the real thing. Now, however, and specifically in the arena of synthetic worlds, the allegedly “virtual” is blending so smoothly into the allegedly “real” as to make the distinction increasingly difficult to see. There’s nothing revolutionary in this, though. It is merely a recognition that these things were always as real as anything else in the human culturesphere. 82
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In these passages, Castronova’s strategy is to integrate what would normally be identified as virtual and what is taken to be real. He does this in order to ground the claim that these latter

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82 Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 148.
“things” too have real value – worth as genuine as the worth of anything else real in the human domain. Here, in other words, the basic idea is that because what is normally taken to be virtual has become “just as real as the real thing” it too has substantial social merit, economic importance and the like.  

Rather than challenge the view that something has to be real in order to be significant, Castronova implicitly assents to the supposition that if something is not real it cannot be as worthy (of concern, of investment, of study, of one’s time, etc.) as reality itself. In this regard, not only does Castronova miss an opportunity to reconsider one of the basic grounds of the very criticisms of MMOGs he opposes, this particular way of conceiving MMOGs ends up producing some distressing results. A paradigmatic case of this appears on p.148 of Synthetic Worlds where Castronova maintains that

[...]

Here, the view that MMOGs are “as real as the real thing” is joined to the conviction that people participating in these games do actually take MMOGs to be real in a way that, for them, brokers

83 This strategy is quite prominent in existing studies of MMOGs. For example, on p. 834 of The Magic Circle, Fairfield maintains that “Players in virtual worlds are real, the actions are real, and even the digital objects of their actions are real”. Ludlow and Wallace attempt to establish the same equivalence by arguing, on p.63 of The Second Life Herald, that what are normally taken to be real goods are no less virtual than many of what are normally taken to be virtual goods.

Although I do not pursue this line of argument myself, it might also be argued here that Castronova hypostatizes between the idea that something has real value and the idea that something that has real value is itself real. For example, what is the reference of “it” in the following passage (quoted also on p.56): “By this process, virtual things become real things; when most people agree that the thing has a real value to somebody, it genuinely does have that value. It is not virtual at all any more but real and genuine”. Does “it” refer to “the thing that has real value” or “the value a thing has”?

84 Castronova, Synthetic Worlds, 148. Approached from a slightly different angle, Castronova echoes this point when he writes on p.102 of Synthetic Worlds that “Perhaps the synthetic world is a game; but then, our world is a game too. There’s really no difference”. No difference between a war in Winterspring and a war in Afghanistan? No difference between calling someone a lousy elf and calling them a lousy !&^%@?
no fundamental difference between what they do “online” and what they do “offline”. On one hand (and less importantly) this seems wrong. I highly doubt, for example, that members of Serenity Now would be equally inclined to invade the funeral of a rival guild-member if that funeral had been held at Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Toronto. In a sense, this is one of the draws of these activities – they involve conducting one’s self in ways that often would not be considered in “the real world”. More importantly, if even somewhat true, the idea that distinguishing real and non-real is a nuisance is intuitively distressing – it seems prima facie to involve a cognitive failure of a significant kind. Whatever the worth, appeal, significance, and effects of what is commonly taking place in MMOGs, it is hard to imagine that being unwilling to tell such activities apart from the broader context of life in which they take place – to find such a process irksome or bothersome – could be anything other than the sign of a real problem.

Speaking more generally, then, a further issue that arises when considering the relationship between existing studies of MMOGs and common conceptions of virtual is this: namely, that despite the pressure that it is possible to exert on these conceptions, what exactly is to be done in response to such pressures is not as clear as it might be thought to be. In practice, the term “virtual” remains in circulation despite the misgivings of those who use it. The attempts of perhaps the best-regarded theorist on MMOGs to do away with the term “virtual” by substituting the term “synthetic” is open to many of the same difficulties, and tends to lean too closely on the term it is meant to replace. Doing away entirely with a division between real and virtual at the level of reality itself implicitly assents to a supposition that those who study MMOGs tend to actively argue against, and leads to some worrying conclusions.

So what exactly is to be done?

V

The approach that I will take in Part 2 of this dissertation is to not begin with the idea that MMOGs are virtual worlds, but to develop an interpretation that ultimately allows both the worldliness and the virtuality of MMOGs to come into focus. This approach has several merits.

85 Castronova echoes this point on p.29 of Synthetic Worlds where he writes “while being physically different from the Earth [synthetic worlds] are not socially different from it. All the standard patterns of human social, economic, and psychological functioning seem to translate directly into the new space”.

First, it does not presume that MMOGs are virtual in any of the usual senses in which this term is understood, but nor does it just transpose some different, non-standard definition of virtual to the analysis of MMOGs in particular. Rather, it takes thinking of MMOGs as in some sense virtual as a challenge to be dealt with through the process of actually studying the phenomena of MMOGs themselves. In addition, because the notions of worldliness and virtuality that I will propose are induced hermeneutically from out of a preliminary phenomenological analysis of the computer games in question, the approach that I will take is able to suspend considerations about the possible reality or non-reality of certain phenomena. This has to do with what I take to be the nature of phenomenological *epoche*. As is well known, by suspending concerns about the possible reality or non-reality of phenomena as they tend to appear in everyday experience, phenomenology is able to make claims about the *meaning* of a particular phenomenal region without presuming, let alone requiring, that these phenomena are indeed real. As such, in arguing, as I will, that MMOGs are virtual worlds, I will not be claiming that MMOGs are as real as what is normally referred to as “the real world”; but nor will I be claiming that they are *not* as real as “the real world”. The conception of virtuality that I will propose takes place at a level of analysis that is prior to differentiating real from non-real. This is not to say that concerns about the reality or non-reality of MMOGs are ultimately irrelevant; but only that (as I believe this chapter indicates) such concepts cannot easily be used to frame analysis of the subject in question, or treated as well-understood notions that can be applied straightforwardly to the study of MMOGs. By adopting a phenomenological approach, it becomes possible to make initial headway into understanding MMOGs as virtual worlds without requiring a conception of reality itself that is robust enough to actually support claims about the possible reality or non-reality of, for example, the emotional, economic, and social investments already manifesting in these games. It is therefore also able to avoid the troubling conclusions that arise when thinking of MMOGs as “just as real” as what is normally referred to as “the real world”.

Before I begin to develop my phenomenological interpretation of MMOGs, however, I want to focus on a second set of issues arising in connection with existing studies of MMOGs. These issues focus on traditional ways in which these studies conceive of avatars.
4 On Avatars

It is generally held that understanding avatars – what they are, what they do, how they function, how they contribute – is central to the project of understanding MMOGs. While I broadly agree with this point of view, in this chapter I am going to discuss two different types of issue with the way in which avatars are traditionally conceived. I will begin by arguing that the way in which existing studies of MMOGs frame the subject of avatars raises a host of questions that these studies have yet to answer, and cannot easily address. I will then discuss some substantive problems with two widespread and influential types of account of avatars: those that maintain that avatars in some sense represent (what I will refer to on p.64 as representational conceptions of avatars), and those that conceive of avatars as bodies of some kind (what I will refer to on p.69 as corporeal conceptions of avatars). By focusing on these two different types of issue, my aim is to motivate an approach towards the study of avatars that puts this subject in question in a more thorough or radical way than has so far been the norm.

I

I want to start by providing a non-exhaustive list of conceptions of avatars commonly found in existing studies of MMOGs. In these studies, avatars are often referred to as:

- A user's representative in a virtual universe.  
- A representation of a user's identity.  
- A cyborg.  
- A virtual self.

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86 In this dissertation, I use the term “avatar” to refer to whatever it is that it is commonly said that “players”, “users”, or “operators” create and control in order to participate in a MMOG. Disambiguation is required because the term “avatar” is nowadays also used to refer to, for example, an image that is uploaded to a Facebook profile, a picture associated with an online forum account, an illustration of one’s gamer-tag on XBOX Live, etc. I do not discuss any of these applications of the term in this dissertation.


88 Ibid, 97.

89 Ibid, 90.

90 Ibid, 92.
• A virtual identity.  
• A graphical body.  
• An on-screen trace of the self.  
• A player's life-like double.  
• A digital representation of a person.  
• An imaginary prosthesis.  
• A player's representation in a video-game.  
• A player's surrogate.  
• An extension of one's body.  
• A crafted human body.  
• A simulated body.  
• A synthetic body.  
• A body.

91 Ibid, 92.
93 Ibid, 111.
99 Castronova, Synthetic Worlds, 45.
100 Castronova, Synthetic Worlds, 1.
101 Castronova, Synthetic Worlds, 9.
102 Castronova, Synthetic Worlds, 6, 32, 78.
In my view, the multiplicity of conceptions of avatars evident in existing studies of MMOGs raises three issues in particular.

First, there has been no sustained effort in these studies to systematically differentiate each of these often-used conceptions from each other. However, it is not difficult to raise challenges that show such differentiation to be required. For example, is an avatar a virtual self? A trace of an actual self? A representation of a self? A representation of a user’s identity? Or a player’s life-like double? How, if at all, are these conceptions meant to relate to one another? Are they roughly synonymous? Are they meant to explain one another? Are they meant to augment or extend one another? Does any have priority over the others? Is the term “avatar” a name for a set of family resemblances? If so, how, and to what extent, do the members of this set fit and not fit together? Are some of these conceptions incompatible? Where do the boundaries between apparently different conceptions of avatars lie, if indeed there are such boundaries to be understood? Not only has little guidance been provided by the studies in which such notion(s) of avatars nonetheless play a central role, there is no clear way of telling whether or not these are the kinds of issue these studies want us to be asking.

Second, in practice, existing studies tend to treat even manifestly different conceptions of avatars as if they were roughly equivalent. For example, in his argument that avatars exemplify postmodern notions of identity, Filiciak moves effortlessly between a number of intuitively different conceptions of avatars. He sometimes uses “cyborg”, sometimes “representation”, sometimes “representative”, sometimes “virtual self”, and sometimes “virtual identity” (ibid) – treating these terms as if they were basically interchangeable without expressly discussing either why he takes them to be equivalent, or the extent to which such terms can be taken to refer to one and the same sort of thing. Moreover, even at a surface level, it is difficult to imagine that referring to an avatar as a representation of some kind could be based on the same sort of grounds that would be required to demonstrate that an avatar is some kind of cyborg. Even at an intuitive level, the grades of conceptual commitment in these cases do not match in intensity or

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103 Castronova, Exodus to the Virtual World, 8.
rigour. There are, of course, many who would assent to the former expression while being extremely dubious about the second.

In his discussion of avatar-based pleasure mechanisms, Martti Lahti also provides a clear example of this questionable treatment of manifestly different conceptions of avatars. When focusing on the viability of creating an avatar with a specific appearance, he writes (my emphasis),

> We are lured into a supermarket of bodies and body-parts from which the player’s representative, her virtual self, can be created and customized. Unhinged from contexts of social inequalities, the body is here aestheticized as variety itself, turning it into a mutable fashion statement, an adaptable task-oriented instrument, or a toy with which we can play.\(^{104}\)

In my view, it is quite difficult not to have the impression that a number of important differences, sensitivities, and commitments are run roughshod here. Is a virtual self a player’s representative? Is this different from being a representation? Is the player an instrument insofar as an avatar is their representative? Are these the sorts of issues which we are meant to be considering? Once again, we have not been provided much in the way of guidance.

Third, although the conceptions listed previously are sometimes taken to be substitutable, it is not clear that these conceptions can be consistently taken to refer to one and the same subject without guidance that existing studies have so far not provided, and may not be in position to provide. For example, even in everyday use, referring to something as “virtual” minimally means something different from referring to it as “representational”, and often means something more. It would be strange to start calling virtual memory (in the sense of that which gives a computer process the impression of contiguous address space) “representational memory”; just as it would be strange to start referring to a CAVE Automatic Virtual Environment as a “CARE Automatic

\(^{104}\) Lahti, “As We Become Machines”, 166. Or, for example, see “As We Become Machines”, p. 161 where Lahti writes of avatars viewed from what is typically called the first-person perspective “[…] at the bottom of the screen [there is] a representation of the player’s hand as a sort of imaginary prosthesis, it links the player’s body into the fictional world, again emphasizing a continuum between the player’s world and that of the game”.
Representational Environment” (to say nothing of calling parliament an assembly of elected virtualities). Something important would seem to be left hanging in the transition from one phrase to the other. But insofar as this is so, how could it be adequate to refer to an avatar both as a virtuality and a representation? Or both as a representation and a representative? Or both as a representative and a virtuality? If this is something that we are not meant to do, why not? Similarly, if an avatar is a graphical body and/or an imaginary prosthesis, does this imply that computer graphics are themselves imaginary? What sense, if any, can be made of this? And if this implication is not meant to hold, why not?

As it currently stands, the way in which existing studies frame the subject of avatars leaves untouched a number of issues that immediately come to mind when referring to avatars in these usual sorts of way. It is not clear how these issues would be resolved within the framework provided by existing studies, nor is it clear whether or not these are the kinds of issue such conceptions are meant to bring to mind.

II

In addition to *prima facie* issues with the way in which existing studies frame the subject of avatars, conceptions of avatars that rely either on notions of *representation* or *embodiment* give rise to substantive issues that these studies also need to take seriously. In this section, my aim is to drill down into the first of these types of account in order to bring such issues to light.

As indicated on p.60, avatars are often referred to as representations of some kind: for example, as representations of a user’s identity or identities, as digital representations of people, as representations of players, etc. Collectively, I will refer to such conceptions as *representational conceptions of avatars*. Here, I am going to raise three challenges for this particular way of understanding the subject in question.

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105 What exactly might be left hanging is, of course, much harder to say.
First, what existing studies of MMOGs actually mean by referring to avatars as representations is not as clear as these studies take it to be. Although terms such as “representation”, “to represent”, and “representative” are widely used in existing studies of MMOGs, there is little explicit discussion in these studies about the exact sense in which avatars have been, or ought to be, taken to represent. Moreover, there are at least four equally-intuitive senses in which an avatar might be thought to represent:

- *Qua* a visual image of something;
- *Qua* a likeness of something;
- *Qua* something that stands-in or is a surrogate for something else;
- *Qua* something that acts on something else’s behalf (i.e. that acts as a representative).

At the absolute minimum, disambiguation is required.

Second, neither is it clear exactly what an avatar is supposed to represent. Some studies refer to that which an avatar allegedly represents as a “person”; other studies say a “player”; others a “user”; others still an “operator” (ibid, p.60). Although it is common practice to differentiate each of these latter terms from one another in and of themselves – in other words, to provide reasons why an author refers to “players” and not “users”, or “users” and not “operators” – no specific attention has been paid to the way in which thinking of avatars as representations of one of these rather than another may effect the way in which the notion of representation itself needs to be understood. For example, if representation is to be understood as “an image of something”, claiming that an avatar is an image of *a person* might arguably be held to be a more weighty claim – and one relatively more difficult to establish – than claiming that an avatar is an image of *a player*. After all, since playing might sensibly be thought to be only one dimension of being a person, a representation itself is going to have to accomplish more or, roughly speaking, “do a lot more work” if it is going to produce a compelling image of a person rather than of a player. Or suppose that representation is to be understood in this context as “something that acts on something else’s behalf”. If that which an avatar represents is held to be a person, here understood in a basic legal sense as that which has rights and duties, rather than a user, does this imply that an avatar – as a person’s *representative* – is itself entitled by virtue of this kind of representational relationship to the same legal rights and obligations accorded the person it represents? Could it then be anything other than murder to intentionally kill another’s avatar? Or,
as a final example, if representation is to be understood in this context as “a visual likeness” of a player what exactly is it that an avatar is supposed to look like if two people create and share a single avatar in order to play the same MMOG at different times?

The final example introduced in the previous paragraph also serves to introduce a different kind of concern. In addition to questions about the type of entity allegedly represented by an avatar, and the way in which the referent imposes different demands on the concept of representation itself, it is not clear how that which an avatar is supposed to represent is meant to be identified. For example, suppose that someone is multi-boxing in a MMOG – playing with five avatars at the same time. Do each of these avatars equally represent one and the same person/player/user/operator? Do they collectively represent this person/player/user/operator when considered as a whole? Do they represent different aspects or parts of a person/player/user/operator? Does someone’s “main” avatar represent them in a different way than one of their “alts”? Does an avatar cease representing a person/player/user/operator when that person/player/user/operator goes AFK? If Michelle logs on to my account and takes Kreekybonez hunting in Winterspring, does Kreekybonez now represent her and not me? To be clear, once again, I am not claiming that it is impossible to answer these sorts of question – only that it is not immediately clear how existing studies of MMOGs would go about addressing these sorts of concern; and also that it is not entirely clear that these are the sorts of question existing studies intend for us to have in mind.

The final challenge I want to raise for representational conceptions of avatars has to do with the various intuitive senses, outlined on p.64, in which an avatar might be thought to represent. While I believe that each of these conceptions is prima facie sensible, it is also not difficult to raise complications for each. Here, I will focus on three kinds of complication in particular.

Many people who participate in MMOGs do so with more than one avatar. Most focus on one avatar for the most part, and have one or more “alternative” avatars that they use, for example, to trade or hold items, to explore regions of the game-world usually not available to them, to communicate with people in a different chat channel, etc.

“AFK” means “away from keyboard”. It is a generic term used to indicate when someone is temporarily stepping away from a MMOG without logging off.
First, the idea that an avatar represents because it bears a visual resemblance to a person/player/user/operator assigns priority to one possible kind of relationship between avatars and persons/players/users/operators without explaining why this priority is warranted. Yes, some avatars are intentionally created to look like someone takes themselves to look. But in some cases avatars are created specifically not to resemble in this way. In some cases, avatars are created without any concern for resemblance or lack thereof (as in the case of “mules” created specifically to transport goods). In some cases, avatars are created for reasons which have to do with preferring how one type of avatar (say, a Blood Elf) looks in comparison to another (Tauren); and not for how an avatar compares to a person/player/user/operator. In some cases, avatars are created not to resemble but for ideological reasons – such as, for example, people who “always play Dwarves”. And in some cases, it is not clear that concerns about whether or not an avatar visually resembles a person/player/user/operator even makes sense (such as in *EVE Online*, for example, where one’s avatar is [at least arguably] a space-craft of some kind). Cases such as these introduce a twofold problem. No argument has yet been made for why a contingent characteristic of some avatars should be taken to be the constitutive feature of “avatar-hood” in general. And no argument has been made for why – even in cases where there is some kind of resemblance – it is legitimate to conclude in the case of avatars that what resembles represents that which it is like. There are, of course, many things that bear a visual likeness to something else that it would be quite wrong to take as representations (identical twins, for example).

Second, the idea that an avatar represents because it stands in, or is a surrogate, for a person/player/user/operator may conflict with one of the central claims that those who subscribe to this view have wanted to make about avatars. Existing studies of MMOGs often maintain that one of the advantages provided by an avatar is that it allows someone to participate in what are often referred to as “remote” forms of interaction in ways that avatar-less forms of telecommunication such as blogs, instant messaging and email cannot match. Here, the basic idea put forward by these studies is that avatars afford a special kind of “presence” which humans find integral to developing complex social practices such as economies, political disagreements, and marriages. For example, on p.68-69 of *Synthetic Worlds*, Castronova writes,
Synthetic worlds are a form of word-communication (through text and, lately, voice) that also enable a kind of physical bodily communication through the gestures and positions of the avatar. They thus offer a higher-quality forum of interaction than the chat room or the telephone.

Here, one issue is that—once again—according to a longstanding philosophical tradition, referring to something as a representation in the sense of a stand-in or surrogate is held to be a tacit admission that it is precisely not “the thing itself” that is at stake where the representation predominates. Avatars as representations in the sense of stand-ins or surrogates could easily be taken in this context to imply that it is ultimately not “actual people” involved in the activities of a MMOG, but only things which substitute for actual people—their proxies or stand-ins. From the perspective of this tradition, even referring to an avatar as a representation would seem to conflict with one of the qualities of avatars which has been claimed to make MMOGs more estimable than other forms of computer-mediated interaction. As it stands, it is not clear how existing studies of MMOGs would disarm this challenge while maintaining that avatars ought to be understood as representations in the relevant sense.

Third, the intuitive idea that an avatar represents because it acts on someone’s behalf might equally sensibly be thought to invert the relationship that existing studies tend to posit between an avatar and a person/player/user/operator: namely, that it is “really” the person/player/user/operator that acts, while an avatar only responds to input. Broadly speaking, an avatar does very little unless a person/player/user/operator acts in some way or another—either by inputting key-commands, moving a mouse or some other peripheral device, speaking into a microphone, etc. Sans this kind of activity, an avatar is basically inert. While, ultimately, I do not think that the connection between an avatar and a person/player/user/operator is as simple as either of these reasonable perspectives, I think this latter complaint does rightly indicate that substantive issues about control, response, activity, and reactivity need to be resolved in order to flesh out the notion of thinking of an avatar as a representation in the sense of an actor on someone’s behalf.
Overall, then, what I think ought to be concluded from the preceding discussion is that it is not clear that thinking of an avatar as some kind of representation actually enhances understanding of MMOGs. The idea that avatars represent gives way under pressure to many challenges – challenges which are not ancillary, but which suggest that serious work remains to be done in order for some notion of representation to perform the role it has been assigned in existing studies of these games. Whether or not such studies are capable of responding to these challenges within the framework they have established for themselves is an open question.

III

As I indicated on p. 60, avatars are also often conceived as bodies of some kind: for example, as crafted human bodies, as synthetic bodies, or as graphical bodies. Collectively, I am going to refer to such conceptions as corporeal conceptions of avatars. In this section, I am going to provide two reasons why I think it is important for corporeal conceptions of avatars to be especially well articulated. In the following section, I will put pressure on such conceptions by arguing that they are supported by two typically unarticulated instrumentalistic and dualistic presuppositions.

Corporeal conceptions of avatars often underwrite two claims about the allegedly meritorious nature of MMOGs in general. As discussed on p. 67, existing studies of MMOGs often maintain that these games have advantages over other forms of telecommunication (such as email and instant messaging) to which MMOGs, in virtue of making use of the same underlying hardware, software, and network technologies, might intuitively be thought comparable. According to these studies, one primary such advantage is that the avatars which people create in order to participate in a MMOG allow people to partake in what are typically taken to be embodied activities – activities such as waving, sitting on chairs, hugging, swimming, running around a park, etc. – despite requiring very little “actual” physical activity on the part of the player/user/operator. The special kind of “presence” that avatars are thus said to grant is, in turn, often held to be one of the basic grounds of the social complexity arising in MMOGs. Here, in other words, the emotional, economic, social, and temporal investments that people appear willing to make in MMOGs is often held to be facilitated by and large by the way in which avatars allow people to be “physically personified” in a MMOG. For Castronova, for example,
this is one of the underlying principles of his analysis of MMOGs in general. He writes on p.295 of *Synthetic Worlds* that,

> An axiom maintained throughout this book is that synthetic worlds represent something truly different from chat, instant messaging, webcams, blogs, and the like. None of those media invoke the Earth and the Earth body as metaphors for interaction. Indeed, much of the extant literature focuses on the disembodiment of users who are online in nonphysical space. With synthetic worlds, however, we do not have disembodiment; rather, we have bodies of choice.

A second, closely related claim which often underwrites views about the purportedly meritorious nature of MMOGs has to do with the kind of embodied activity allegedly made possible by avatars. Here, the contention is that avatars allow people to interact with one another with bodies that they *design and create for themselves*, rather than with a body whose sex, appearance, features, and constitution are, in some cases, determined without any personal input whatsoever and, in other cases, subject to only comparatively minor alterations. In turn, this is said to provide people with a high degree of freedom in the embodied interactions they typically have within a MMOG. Within these worlds, these studies maintain, it is up to *you* how you want to appear to others, right down to the color of your eyes and the tone of your skin; up to *you* to decide whether you want to be large, thin, short, tall, light-skinned or green-skinned; and up to *you* to chose what physical strengths and limitations, if any, are imposed upon you within the game in question. It is in this respect, for example, that Castronova refers to avatars specifically as “bodies of choice” (Ibid). Castronova also provides one paradigmatic expression of this view when he writes,

> Synthetic worlds allow us to experience human social life in an environment in which many characteristics of the body are no longer fixed endowments but have become chosen attributes. People entering a synthetic world can have, in principle, any kind of body they desire. At a stroke, this feature of synthetic worlds removes from the social calculus all the unfortunate effects that
derive from the body. Imagine a world in which all aspects of our physical appearance were under our control, so that all variation in thin, heavy, tall, small, dark and light were all voluntary.\textsuperscript{108}

This sort of claim is echoed by Ludlow and Wallace in \textit{The Second Life Herald} when they write, for example, that

All physical imperfections are airbrushed away when one becomes “embodied” in an avatar. Your on-screen representation is as cute or handsome as the game lets it be; you don’t have to worry about your appearance, you can just “be yourself”.\textsuperscript{109}

A similar sentiment is also expressed by Miroslaw Filiciak when he writes,

It is easy to notice that the MMORPG user situation is an idealized image of the situation of the postmodern human creature, in which a user can freely shape his own “self”. On the Internet this freedom reaches a heretofore unprecedented extent, since we have full control over our own image – other people see us in the way we want to be seen.\textsuperscript{110}

Why, then, do I think that it is important for corporeal conceptions of avatars to be especially well articulated? The first reason is because the claim that avatars are bodies of some kind is called upon by existing studies to establish some significant conclusions about the nature of interactions taking place in MMOGs. These studies are not just claiming that avatars \textit{are} bodies of some sort, but that, \textit{in being bodies}, avatars allow people to engage in activities which do not require much of “their own” body, but which are nonetheless still \textit{em-bodied}. In other

\textsuperscript{108} Castronova, \textit{Synthetic Worlds}, 25. See also Castronova, \textit{Synthetic Worlds}, 258 where he writes “Take note that in synthetic worlds, we do not \textit{get} a body, we \textit{pick} one. Therefore, our bodies will generally be just what we want them to be. Imagine the broad impact on human society of a world in which body appearance was completely fungible. Erase, at a stroke, every contribution to human inequality that stems from body differences”.\textsuperscript{109} Ludlow and Wallace, \textit{The Second Life Herald}, 52 (their quotation marks). Note that the tension of referring to an avatar both as a body and as a representation is apparent in this quote.\textsuperscript{110} Filiciak, “Hyperidentities”, 90.
words, substantial claims about the value and worth of MMOGs – in comparison both with other technologies and with “the real world” itself – depend upon viewing avatars as *incarnations* of people. In this respect, I believe that there is quite a lot more at stake in corporeal conceptions of avatars than there is, for example, in the representational notions of avatars discussed previously. In these latter cases, notions of representation were used in primarily explicative ways: appealing to some notion of representation was first and foremost meant to assist understanding of what avatars themselves are and how they function. In corporeal conceptions of avatars, however, taking avatars to be bodies of some kind is not intended only to explain what avatars are, it grounds the further claims that the interactions taking place in a MMOG are both importantly *different* and often *better* than those possible in “the real world”.

Because of the claims that are commonly based on corporeal conceptions of avatars, these conceptions cannot help but recall discussions which developed during the mid-to-late 1990s in studies devoted to contemporary information technologies in general. According to these discussions, one of the merits of then-so-called “new media technologies” is that they will allow human beings to have an array of experiences which are increasingly liberated from the alleged restrictions imposed on us by what proponents of this view seemed to regard as “natural” human corporeality. Understood within this context, studies of MMOGs implicitly position their understanding of avatars as “making good” on an early promise of networked electronic digital computing technologies in general. Think, for example, of John Perry Barlow’s famous conception of cyberspace as a “civilization of the Mind”.\footnote{John Perry Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace”, entry posted Feb 8, 1996, \url{http://www.lafraze.net/nbernard/misc/Declaration-Final.html} (last accessed Aug 10, 2010).} Insofar as avatars are taken to be bodies of choice, MMOGs might seem to do cyberspace in general one better: permitting us to create “civilizations of the mind” in which each person can also create an ideal body to go along with their new ideal cyber-consciousness.

In recalling these discussions, however, corporeal conceptions of avatars simultaneously open themselves up to a form of critique that was equally apparent during the mid-to-late 1990s. According to this form of critique, one of the predicted dangers of “new media technologies” is that they will require people to adapt to activities in which the significance of the “actual” human body increasingly diminishes. Here, the kind of liberation allegedly promised by MMOGs would
likely be regarded as exemplifying exactly this sort of danger. For example, consider Castronova’s contention that creating “bodies of choice” will allow us to “erase, at a stroke, every contribution to human inequality that stems from body differences”. Proponents of the kind of criticism here in question would likely regard this prospect as more terrifying than liberating. Is there not immense danger in having the ability to wield such an eraser? Is effacing differences in this way socially responsible even if viable? Are there not real risks involved in “undoing whatever you may not like about your own body” by simply “building a new body” in a new world?  

The second reason why I believe that corporeal conceptions of avatars need to be clearly articulated, then, is because such views, at least from a philosophical standpoint, give rise to a host of questions whose answers are by no means obvious, and for which the stakes are quite high. Some questions which immediately come to mind (in addition to those in the preceding paragraph) include:

- If what people wanted, and had a right to expect, from the technologies of which MMOGs make use was a way of liberating themselves from “natural” human corporeality, why would the creation of bodies “fit for virtual worlds” have such widespread appeal?
- Could it be said that MMOGs actually signify a kind of corporeal conservatism – a reluctance to let the body go?
- Does the popularity of MMOGs suggest that those participating in such games by and large desire idealized or purified forms of corporeality rather than their own comparatively “muddy” corporeality?
- In allegedly providing us with many different sorts of customizable bodies, do MMOGs perhaps inadvertently establish a kind of dis-embodiment?
- Whose body is it if two people share control of one and the same avatar?

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112 Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 258.
113 Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 78.
• How is it possible to be embodied in more than one place at the same time when multi-boxing several avatars?
• If an avatar is my body in a MMOG, why do I not get a feeling of having sat down when my avatar sits?

The problem – or so I will argue in the following section – is that corporeal conceptions of avatars are not well equipped to deal with the questions they set in motion. These studies have tended not to clearly articulate grounds for holding that the kind of avatar activity which is actually taking place in contemporary MMOGs (rather than, say, activity which might be possible in the future) is embodied activity. And, when articulated, my view is that the sense in which avatars have been thought to be bodies in existing studies of MMOGs is grounded by two instrumentalistic and dualistic presuppositions – presuppositions that, at minimum, deserve further consideration than they have so far received.

IV

To begin, why exactly is it that proponents of corporeal conceptions of avatars believe that the avatars actually found in contemporary MMOGs are bodies of some kind? What are their grounds for holding this belief?

Answers to these questions are not nearly as apparent as one might expect. Although corporal conceptions of avatars are widely circulated in existing studies of MMOGs, the reasoning in support of the basic view that avatar activity = embodied activity is not perspicuous. These studies seem to take for granted that this underlying view has been sufficiently established in the wider literature concerning contemporary information technologies in general, and can therefore be unproblematically applied to the specific case of MMOGs.114 For example, in their recent paper “The Tyranny of Embodiment” Yee, Ellis, and Duchenault begin by asserting that “everywhere we look in contemporary virtual worlds we see an insistence on creating virtual

bodies that mirror our physical ones”. For this reason, these authors suggest, (what they refer to as) virtual worlds have – in their view, unfortunately – tended to “insist on replicating physical reality and physical embodiment” rather than on exploring alternative modes of embodiment that may ultimately benefit the interactions taking place in these sorts of domain. In this regard, although Yee, Ellis, and Duchenault themselves mention what they refer to as “the assumption of embodiment” they do not discuss at length why, or to what extent, they believe that this assumption actually corresponds to some fact about activity in contemporary MMOGs. While they advocate a different type of embodiment, and even at one point invoke the question “What is embodiment?”, they do not actually consider at length their own reasons for taking avatar activity to be embodied activity in the specific case of MMOGs.

As is the case in many studies, Yee, Ellis, and Duchenault pay special attention to the fact that avatars are very often designed to look like humanoid figures. In a great number (although not in all) contemporary MMOGs, avatars typically tend to be depicted as having a head with eyes, nose, ears, and a mouth; a torso with appendages such as two arms and two legs; arms with identifiable hands and legs with identifiable feet. This fact alone, however, is not sufficient to establish that avatars are bodies of some kind (let alone that what would typically be referred to as “my” avatar is, at least for the purposes of activity in a MMOG, “my” body), but only that avatars have the appearance of humanoid bodies (at least to a large degree). It almost goes without saying that many objects which we clearly do not consider to be bodies (let alone embodiments of ourselves) may also have such appearances. As such, the question remains why, in the case of MMOGs, we are assumed to take these look-a-like bodies as incarnations or physical manifestations of ourselves and of other people.

Moreover, even supposing that it was true to say that, by and large, what people participating in a MMOG take themselves to be doing when, for example, creating an avatar is creating a new body for themselves, it is not difficult to put pressure on the adequacy of this way of thinking. For example, suppose someone intuitively felt that the avatar named “Kreekybonez”

116 Ibid, 4.
117 Ibid, 8.
was their body in *World of Warcraft*. Would they still hold the same view once it is pointed out, for example, that Kreekybonez has no autonomic functions? Or that Kreekybonez cannot move its torso? Or that what they might intuitively take to be Kreekybonez’s corporeality is extremely selective – preventing Kreekybonez from moving through most walls and ceilings, but not through flags or certain rocks or other avatars? Or that this body does not provide the one supposedly embodied with any sort of tactile awareness? Or that the eyes which appear to be on the face of this humanoid body do not blink or move or water or have eyelashes; and that the fingers which appear to be part of the hands cannot grasp anything? Again, the point here is not to establish that people do not actually or should not take themselves to be embodied by way of their avatars; but only that the grounds for why theorists have thought that people do or should think this are not apparent.

In addition to the generally humanoid appearance of most avatars, I believe that what existing studies of MMOGs tend to have in mind when conceiving of avatars as bodies of some kind has to do with the nature of the “connection” or “link” that they take to hold between an avatar and what they typically refer to as a player/user/operator. In this respect, my hypothesis is that proponents of this view believe that avatars are bodies of some kind because:

1. First, they regard an avatar as something that a player/user/operator *uses* in order to, for example, move around in a MMOG, make gestures such as waving or pointing to other player/user/operators, and participate in group activities. In other words, the first part of my hypothesis is that studies of MMOGs have tended to regard avatars basically as a kind of instrument or tool to be used by a person while playing this sort of game; and,

2. Second, they have assumed that what they typically refer to as a player/user/operator’s *own body* is itself a vehicle for a player/user/operator’s mind or consciousness; something that is “inhabited” by someone’s mind and that a person *also uses* in this case to, for example, move around in “the real world”, make gestures to other people, and engage in group activities here on Earth.

I refer to these two reasons specifically as parts of a hypothesis because the propositions I ascribe to proponents of corporeal conceptions of avatars are certainly not widely and explicitly formulated in existing studies of MMOGs. Evidence supporting this hypothesis for the most part has to be gleaned from a generally diffuse and thereby amorphous set of suppositions which are
sometimes only said in a veiled way, and sometimes not expressed but only implied. With that said, however, evidence of having taken avatars to be instruments or tools that a player/user/operator uses (i.e. evidence in support of #1 above) is in fact provided in a few places by Castronova’s *Synthetic Worlds*. For example, when introducing the concept of avatars in general Castronova writes,

users drive around in these worlds using a video game character in much the same way that we use a car to drive around the Earth.\(^{118}\)

Later on, he echoes the same view when writing,

[an avatar] might be a humanoid body, or some animal, or a ship, or a machine. This is the person or thing you are going to inhabit in the world; think of it as your vehicle, your car.\(^{119}\)

In these two quotes, avatars are taken to be tools that we use, much in the same way that Castronova takes us to treat objects such as cars – which is to say, as things which are useful to us, and which help us achieve our goals and aims. Note first, however, that Castronova also speaks explicitly in the second quote of avatars and the vehicles to which he compares them as things that a person “is going to inhabit” (ibid). Because we do not normally think of cars or ships or machines as tools that we inhabit, my feeling here is that this quote also suggests a deeper level of commitment about what Castronova takes bodies in general to be – namely, things inhabited by *us*.

Second, I also suspect that there is more at stake than might at first be apparent with the sense in which Castronova advocates taking avatars to be *vehicles*. On one hand, referring to an avatar as someone’s “vehicle” is clearly meant to suggest that avatars are used to “convey” or “transport” people around while participating in a MMOG. However, I also believe that there is a different sense of “vehicle” being intoned here: vehicle in the sense of a medium of expression

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\(^{118}\) Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 1.

\(^{119}\) Castronova, *Synthetic Worlds*, 32.
which allows something to be set-forth or achieved.\textsuperscript{120} In other words, my feeling is that the claim that an avatar is a vehicle is here being thought along two axes at the same time: first, in a sense which likely corresponds with what people intuitively take themselves to be doing when “using” an avatar – e.g. moving “it” around in order to get “them” to a particular destination in the game; and, second, in a sense which is meant to suggest that an avatar is a \textit{manifestation} of something, a palpable setting-into-motion of something, a \textit{vessel}.

Evidence of having taken human bodies to be instruments or tools used by mind (i.e. evidence in support of \#2 on p.76) is even more tenuous, and has to be surmised largely from what proponents of corporal views of avatars take themselves to actually be explaining when they refer to avatars as bodies of some kind. This perspective also finds expression in Castronova’s \textit{Synthetic Worlds}. At one point, for example, he explicitly claims that,

\begin{quote}
The body is the tool by which the mind receives sensation and manipulates the environment, and the avatar body does exactly and only that.\textsuperscript{121}
\end{quote}

In a somewhat more self-effacing fashion, he writes later that,

\begin{quote}
When I first began to spend significant amounts of time in synthetic worlds, I often had the eerie feeling in the real world that the people passing by were really nothing more than avatars, just vehicles for the mind of a real person whose true location and condition I could never know.\textsuperscript{122}
\end{quote}

When Castronova refers to “the body” in the first quote he clearly has in mind \textit{both} human-bodies and avatar-bodies; and explicitly refers to such bodies collectively as the mind’s tool (ibid). In the second quote, the notion of the body being a vehicle is re-introduced – here in the

\textsuperscript{120} Such as, for example, when we say that a painting is a vehicle for someone’s political views.

\textsuperscript{121} Castronova, \textit{Synthetic Worlds}, 45.

\textsuperscript{122} Castronova, \textit{Synthetic Worlds}, 123.
sense of being something that may cloak or conceal the mind of a “real person” acting behind the scenes.

In addition to this hypothesis, I claim that there are two basic issues with thinking about avatars and bodies in the way that I allege proponents of corporeal conceptions of avatars have been thinking. First, this way of thinking is instrumentalistic. By this, I do not mean only that proponents of this view regard avatars as instruments (which was itself part of the hypothesis I described above). What I mean is that, in addition to this, they have also presumed that human bodies too are instruments or tools that are used by a person or a person’s mind/consciousness. In this, they have taken a view that, at least arguably, sometimes makes sense of a restricted kind of so-called “embodied” activity as the standard for embodied activity in general without explicitly evaluating grounds for holding this general belief. For example, conceiving of my body as a kind of tool used by me might be one way feasible way of explaining how it is that I use my elbow to prop open a door. But I do not obviously use my body to sit down in a seat, just as I do not obviously use my avatar to fall down a cliff while running from a Fel Reaver. Here, a substantial theoretical presupposition has been made without explicit consideration.

Second, I also maintain that the way in which proponents of corporeal conceptions of avatars have been thinking of avatars and bodies (and minds) is dualistic in three regards:

- First, it is dualistic in that it treats an avatar and a player/user/operator as two distinct, and basically different, kinds of being – both of which can be without the other – and then supposes that there is some kind of relationship between these elements that is sufficient to explain how acts apparently involving both count as embodied activity. It is not clear, however, why one thing that uses another thing to perform an act should make the act in question an incarnation of the actor. How exactly is it that the human-element and the avatar-element “mesh” in such a way that when the first uses the second specifically embodied activity is achieved? Appealing to so-called “interface” devices such as a keyboard and mouse are no use here because they simply serve to push the question back a level: if a person uses a keyboard and a mouse in order to use their avatar to wave to someone, why is it that manipulating an avatar by way of such additional tools counts as the actor’s embodied activity? In this context, it would perhaps not be out of place to refer to this issue as the problem of the avatar’s pineal gland.
Second, this view is dualistic in that it takes the division that it posits between an avatar and a player/user/operator to line up with, or repeat, a division that it also presumes to hold between a player/user/operator’s body and their own mind. In this respect, corporeal conceptions of avatars draw upon an assumption about the twofold nature of human corporeality and human consciousness without thinking about how avatars may perhaps even draw this assumption into question. A basic division between mind and body is taken as self-evident (for example, in the quotes on p. 78) and then simply applied to the case of MMOGs. Here, such a division becomes axiomatic rather than something explicitly drawn into question.

Third, this view is dualistic in that it attributes the “cognitive force” – the motivation, will, or reason – for what is judged to be embodied activity to one side of the division (i.e. to the player/user/operator) and takes the other side of the division (i.e. the avatar/body) to be something that is subject to the “mental commands” issued to it from the other side. Diagrammatically, the reasoning which underwrites corporeal conceptions of avatars thus looks something like this:

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Player (active)   Avatar (responsive)
Mind (active)    X
Body (responsive) X
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In my view, however, both terms of this equivalence are questionable. To what extent is it adequate to regard what existing studies refer to as player/user/operators as minds first and foremost? What is the relationship between a player/user/operator’s “own” bodily activity and the supposedly embodied activity of their avatar? Is it correct that the relationship between elements here is primarily one of control? What about the “bodily reactions” that people often have when responding to what has happened to what is taken to be their avatar-body in a MMOG (for example, shaking their head when someone ninja-loots something)? Is this a different kind of embodied activity? The same? Is my own body my mind’s avatar in “the real world” (as Castronova himself seems to suggest)?
What exactly does the preceding argument amount to? To be clear, my objective in this section has not been to argue that avatars are not bodies of some kind, or that people in general, or those studying MMOGs should not regard avatars as bodies for the purposes of investigation. But nor has it been to defend the claim that avatars are or ought to be regarded as bodies in at least some sense. What I have argued, rather, is that corporal conceptions of avatars in existing studies of MMOGs are supported by often unarticulated, philosophically-weighty, instrumentalistic and dualistic presuppositions. Moreover, despite criticisms that these two latter sorts of view have received in contemporary philosophical discourse, I do not assume, nor will I take on the task of arguing here, that instrumentalism and dualism of the kind that I think has become apparent are themselves inadequate or fundamentally unsatisfying. Rather, my point has been to establish, first, that significant work remains to be done at the very foundations of what is actually being thought when “avatar activity” is taken to be “embodied activity” in a MMOG; and, second, that actually doing this work – getting clear on the extent to which it does make sense to regard avatars as bodies of some kind – is especially pertinent for existing studies of MMOGs. Because of the claims that these studies base on the idea that avatars provide a means of embodiment, there is manifestly more at stake here than has to do simply with these computer games: conceptions about our own corporeality, our own minds, how we involve ourselves in our environment, and what we take ourselves to be are wrapped up with one of the widespread and influential ways in which avatars have been conceived. Such notions cannot be leaned upon and then simply put aside.

In my view, then, an overarching lesson to be learned from the issues I have raised in this chapter is that conceptions of avatars that gain ground by treating ideas such as representation, the body, and embodiment as relatively unproblematic concepts that can be straightforwardly applied to the study of MMOGs incur considerable conceptual debts that, at some point, are likely to come calling. The service that popular conceptions of avatars have been called upon to do – broadly

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123 In this regard, Filiciak’s enigmatic response to his own sense of the dualism at work in corporeal conceptions of avatars is worrisome. He writes on p.92 of “Hyperidentities” that “I do not think that isolating the body from the mind has any justification, but in cyberspace this Cartesian dualism is being weakened in some ways and strengthened in others, and I intentionally do not examine this issue here”. Even if the issue was not to be examined, it would help immensely to know what Filiciak takes the issue(s) to be…
speaking, to help establish MMOGs as domains of complex social practice, involving people, and therefore worthy of interest – has largely succeeded. What worries me, however, is the extent to which such studies can continue to progress without more closely evaluating the concepts they have leveraged in terms sufficiently responsive to the field of study in question.

With this lesson in mind, the approach that I will take towards studying avatars in Part 2 of this dissertation is once again motivated by what I take to be the nature of phenomenological *epoche*. By bracketing concepts such as representation, embodiment, cyborgs, identity, the self, etc. from my analysis, my aim is to develop an interpretation of avatars that focuses initially on the contributions that avatars make to the way in which MMOGs are experienced in everyday human conduct. Such an analysis – while certainly not presuppositionless – will also take on the task of reflexively evaluating the presuppositions that give this phenomenological perspective life. In particular, I will propose in chapter 7 that avatars should be understood in terms of what I will refer to as *conjuncture*: an intimacy between avatars and human beings that subsists at an existential-ontological level. Interpreting avatars in this way will not only allow us to bypass the kinds of instrumentalistic and dualistic presuppositions discussed in this chapter; it will also provide an opportunity to rethink some of the basic characteristics of human existence in general.
Part Two: A Phenomenological Analysis of Massively Multiplayer Online Games

5 Phenomenology as a Provisional Method

It is useful to begin Part 2 of this dissertation by recounting the main arguments of Part 1.

In chapter 3, I argued that there are three problems with allowing common conceptions of virtual to influence understanding of MMOGs. First, I argued that it is not clear to what extent MMOGs actually are virtual in these common senses. Second, I argued that these conceptions conflict with the way in which MMOGs unsettle what are usually taken to be binary distinctions. Third, I argued that such conceptions might ultimately prove dangerous both for theory and in practice. The aim of these arguments was to bring to light how existing studies of MMOGs continue to apply notions of virtual that arguably conflict with their own analyses, and how they attempt to deal with the term “virtual” by adopting some intuitively unsatisfying and philosophically problematic strategies (typically, by advocating alternative terms [such as “synthetic”] that do not serve much better, or by integrating the virtual and the real in ways that lead to some worrisome conclusions).

In chapter 4, I began by arguing that the way in which existing studies of MMOGs frame the subject of avatars raises a host of questions that these studies have yet to answer, and cannot easily answer. I then focused explicitly on conceptions of avatars involving either some notion of representation or some notion of corporeality. In the first case, I raised three challenges for understanding avatars as representations of some kind: first, that what is actually meant by calling an avatar “a representation” is not as clear as existing studies of MMOGs take it to be; second, that the type and the identification of what an avatar is supposed to represent is not clear; and, third, that it is possible to raise challenges for each of the four intuitive senses in which an avatar might be thought to represent. Collectively, I held that these arguments suggest that considerable work remains to be done in order for some notion of representation to perform the role it has been assigned in existing studies of MMOGs.
With respect to corporeal conceptions of avatars, I argued that the sense in which avatars have been thought to enable embodied activity in contemporary MMOGs was underwritten by two instrumentalistic and dualistic presuppositions. While I did not argue that such presuppositions were themselves inherently flawed, I did claim both that significant work remains to be done in order to flesh out an embodied account of avatars, and that – because existing studies of MMOGs base significant claims upon the idea that avatars are bodies of some kind – there is a real onus on these studies to better articulate their grounds for holding this particular belief.

II

It is perhaps not surprising that issues such as those discussed in Part 1 should arise in connection with existing studies of MMOGs. Given the inchoate state of theories about computer games in general, it might even be thought that such issues demonstrate the fecundity of this relatively new academic field. After all, if Espen Aarseth was correct in nominating 2001 “year one” of computer game studies, it would be strange if – a decade or so later – there was little left to do with respect to the study of MMOGs in particular other than to extend the conclusions of prior analyses, and iron out a few basically isolated concerns.124

Clearly, it might be possible to take an incremental approach to the challenges raised in Part 1 – to address each of these issues on a case-by-case basis, and attempt to resolve them in a way that contributes to a more compelling overall account of MMOGs. Such an approach is sensible and even tempting. But it is not the approach that I will take in the remainder of this dissertation. My view, rather, is that the challenges that have been raised suggest that there is a need to approach the subject of MMOGs more cautiously and, in some cases, with more uncertainty about what exactly is going on in these games than has so far been the norm. These challenges provide an opportunity to hold the study of MMOGs to a different conceptual standard than has motivated the analysis of these games thus far: an opportunity not just to attempt to “fix” what has not been working, but to re-evaluate some of the basic terms in which

the study of MMOGs has gained initial ground, and to reconfigure the conceptual landscape within which issues such as the ones I have discussed become capable of taking hold.

In keeping with this view, the approach that I will take in Part 2 of this dissertation is more extensive than incremental. My motivation for taking this approach is primarily because I do not think that it is clear that responding directly to the issues that have been discussed is actually the most productive way of furthering understanding of MMOGs. As I believe that I have shown, it would be neither a simple nor a straightforward task to resolve these issues within the framework adopted by existing studies. For this reason, my working hypothesis is that it may turn out to be ultimately more productive – albeit more difficult at the start – to reframe the terms in which an analysis of MMOGs is initially conceived. In a sense, and although I suspect that it will likely appear otherwise at the outset, my motivation for adopting the approach that I will take is to a large degree deflationary: it aims to uncouple the study of MMOGs from the substantive conceptual weight that has accrued via the often uncritical application of certain concepts (e.g. virtual worlds, representations, digital bodies) to the field of study in question. Why attempt to resolve a mind/body split in conceptions of avatars if understanding avatars could be framed in a way that makes such dualisms wholly unnecessary? Why consent to dropping the term “virtual” from discourse – essentially leaving it to those who would think it in a binary way – if it was possible to re-conceive the virtual in a way that both corresponds with the sense in which MMOGs are virtual, and enhances understanding of the virtual *writ large*? Why embrace the troubling conclusion that differentiating real from virtual is a “nuisance” if there is a way to understand each of these apparent domains that is capable of doing equal justice to both MMOGs and “the real world”?

As I have indicated, the approach that I will take towards studying MMOGs provisionally adopts a phenomenological method of analysis. Broadly speaking, this means that I am going to:

1. Take a step back from the way in which MMOGs have been theorized to date by bracketing concepts such as virtual, representation, embodiment, player, user, operator, etc. – concepts that have traditionally played a significant role in contemporary theories of MMOGs.
2. Develop an existential-ontological interpretation of some of the phenomena commonly experienced while participating in MMOGs.

3. Revisit some of the concepts that were bracketed for the purposes of initiating this study in order to examine how these concepts may play a role in advancing our understanding of MMOGs within a phenomenological framework.

4. Examine how developing a phenomenological interpretation of MMOGs draws into question the existential-ontological framework that provisionally orients Part 2 of this dissertation.

With respect to these four practices, a few points bear further description. First, what I mean by bracketing in this context echoes the basic principles of phenomenological *epoche* that I have already discussed on p.59 and p.82. Bracketing means suspending the use of concepts that have traditionally been applied in studies of MMOGs until such a time that the phenomena that have become apparent by way of the impending analysis suggest that understanding these phenomena in such terms will actually aid understanding.

What I mean by developing an existential-ontological interpretation of MMOGs is better demonstrated than described, but, at least at a high-level, can be outlined as follows. Here, I am using the term interpretation (in German, “Interpretation” rather than “Auslegung”) to mean a systematic development of meaning intended to initiate the movement from a pre-ontological awareness to an ontological understanding of certain phenomena. This means that I am going to interpret phenomena in terms of their Being; which is to say – very roughly – to interpret them in terms of that which I will claim allows such phenomena to be experienced in the ways in which I will claim they typically are in everyday human existence.125 The interpretation of MMOGs that I will develop is existential-ontological in that it focuses on what I will take to be a particular region of human existence, and does so – at least initially – by leveraging some of the concepts, themes, motifs, and discoveries developed by Heidegger in the analysis of Dasein conducted primarily in Division 1 and Division 2 of The Main Part of *History of the Concept of Time*; in

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125 This is likely one of those unusual expressions that communicates quite a lot to those who already understand it; but very little to those who do not. This is one reason why I believe that what I mean by an existential-ontological interpretation is better demonstrated than described.
Division 1 and Division 2 of Part One of *Being and Time*; and in Part 2 of *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*. When I refer – as I often will in Part 2 – to “a traditional phenomenological perspective” or to “a traditional phenomenological point of view”, what I mean to refer to is the particular tradition of phenomenological thinking by and large established collectively by the aforementioned works.

What I intend by adopting phenomenology as a *provisional* approach to studying MMOGs should be understood as follows. Even though my analysis of MMOGs is explicitly guided by the analysis of Dasein developed in Heidegger’s early philosophy, my approach to the subject at hand does not involve simply substituting concepts from existential-ontology for those commonly applied in existing studies of MMOGs. Nor is my objective to attempt to “fit” the study of MMOGs into a particular pre-existing phenomenological framework. As will be shown, MMOGs have the tendency to unsettle traditional existential-ontological notions in much the same way that they unsettle concepts arriving from other venues. For this reason, part of what I take to be involved in studying MMOGs phenomenologically will be to examine ways in which the phenomena within this particular region of human existence test, stretch, put pressure on, and perhaps even transcend the boundaries of traditional phenomenological thinking. With respect to this methodology, the following hermeneutic progression will often become apparent as this study progresses:

1. Conduct a preliminary analysis of certain phenomena in order to induce concepts that are useful for the study of MMOGs.

2. Use these concepts to extend understanding of the phenomena from which they were drawn, and of other phenomena that come to light as a result of thinking about MMOGs using the concepts I propose.

3. Encourage these concepts to reflexively put in question the adequacy of the phenomenological framework that helps give these concepts life.

4. Do some constructive work on the framework itself.

5. Repeat.
In my view, facilitating critical, reflexive relationships among an interpretation that develops by way of leveraging certain existential-ontological notions, and the concepts which develop by way of this interpretation, is integral to the spirit of phenomenology. It is ultimately to this spirit that I hope to remain true, rather than to any particular kind of phenomenology or set of phenomenological propositions. While I do not subscribe to Husserl’s contention that phenomenology is – or ought to aim to be – a “presuppositionless science”, I do think that phenomenology should continually strive to make its own presuppositions as perspicuous as possible, while also advocating the idea that this can only ever be an incomplete procedure. Although a phenomenological approach to studying MMOGs may show surprising elasticity when introduced to the kinds of conceptual challenges that will become apparent as this study progresses, if there should come a time at which the interpretation I will develop is no longer recognizable as phenomenology, I would find that to be an acceptable conclusion.

It is also necessary to preface the analysis that will follow with two notes regarding its scope. First, following the convention established by existing studies of MMOGs, I have so far taken the term “MMOG” to refer both to games such as World of Warcraft, EverQuest, Eve Online, Warhammer Online, Star Wars Galaxies and the like, and to what are sometimes referred to as “online social environments” or “avatar-based chat communities” such as Second Life and There. This was adequate for the purposes of discussing existing studies of MMOGs. However, in the analysis that will follow, I focus on the first type of MMOG and do not assume that this interpretation applies straightforwardly to other kinds of massively multiplayer online application – ones that, despite having both surface similarities to, and differences with, games such as World of Warcraft and EverQuest, have tended to be grouped together for the purposes of academic discussion.

Second, it is important to note that my aim in Part 2 is not to develop anything like a complete or thorough phenomenological analysis of MMOGs. Rather, what I am to do in the remainder of this dissertation is, first, to provide an existential-ontological interpretation of certain phenomena that I think should serve as some of the basic “pillars” upon which a more thorough phenomenological interpretation of MMOGs can be built; and, second, to demonstrate that these “pillars” are in fact capable of supporting further developments integral to understanding this particular phenomenal region. For this reason, at several points in the analysis
that follows, I will suggest some ways in which my interpretation may lend insight to issues that are not themselves addressed at length in this dissertation.

Finally, before I actually begin, I want to state that, although I believe that a phenomenological analysis of MMOGs has certain intrinsic merits – of bracketing problematic concepts; of striving to do justice to the phenomena in question; of developing an interpretation hermeneutically – I also believe that, at least at this point, it has to be considered an open question whether or not the approach that I will take will satisfy the motivation I have described for conducting this analysis. Will it turn out to be worth taking this particularly challenging route towards understanding MMOGs? Will enough be gained by taking an approach that is more extensive than incremental? We are going to have to wait and see. I can provide no \(a \text{ priori}\) guarantee, but I also think that the effort ought to be made regardless of this genuine uncertainty.

With that being said, what I also think will become apparent by the end of this dissertation is that analyzing MMOGs phenomenologically invites thinking about substantially more than just a particular kind of computer game. Understanding this phenomenal region will provide an opportunity to also consider some of the basic characteristics of ourselves as finite beings that share a world and perish, and will ultimately provide insight into the temporal constitution of human existence in general.

My phenomenological analysis of MMOGs proceeds as follows:

**Chapter 6 Preliminary Interpretation of MMOGs**

In this chapter, I will begin my interpretation of MMOGs by providing a brief overview of the traditional phenomenological notions of world [Welt] and worldliness [Weltlichkeit]. I will then argue that there are grounds for interpreting MMOGs as worlds understood in an existential-ontological sense. I will also claim that what allows MMOGs to come to presence as worlds is because they exhibit structural features of worldliness – the ontological meaning of world understood as an existentiale of Dasein.

**Chapter 7 Interpreting MMOGs as Places**

In this chapter, I will argue that there are three reasons for interpreting the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed as places in a sense which recalls Heidegger’s use of the term
“Gegenden”. Next, I will argue that the phenomenological framework that has been provisionally followed in Part 2 would have a difficult time explaining how it has become possible for human beings to encounter these locations as places in the relevant sense. This argument involves putting pressure on several important Heideggerian notions: the fundamental-ontological distinction between Dasein and the Being of entities other than Dasein; the idea that Dasein alone discloses world; and the notion that whatever Dasein appears to make use of within an environment only obtains its place because of the de-severing and directionality of Dasein’s own Being. Finally, I will introduce the concept of \textit{conjuncture} to account for the way in which Dasein and avatars function together at an existential-ontological level to enable Dasein to encounter MMOGs as worlds in the relevant sense.

**Chapter 8 Fallenness, Thrownness, and MMOGs**

In chapter 8, I will extend my interpretation of MMOGs by focusing on the phenomena of \textit{fallenness} and \textit{thrownness}. Focusing on these two phenomena will re-confirm my initial interpretation of MMOGs as worlds, but will also suggest that the traditional boundaries of the concepts of fallenness and thrownness need to be redrawn in order to account for phenomena that commonly arise while participating in a MMOG. In addition, this chapter will provide the foundation for a discussion regarding the relationship between fallenness, thrownness, and inauthenticity that is conducted in chapter 10.

**Chapter 9 Interpreting MMOGs as Virtual Worlds**

In this chapter, I will propose to understand the virtuality of MMOGs in terms of the \textit{creative repetition of ontological structures of human existence}. This proposal is intended to account for the differing intensities and combinations of ontological continuities and ontological differences that will become apparent through chapters 6 – 8. I will also explain why this concept of virtuality is not prone to the challenges raised in Part 1 of this dissertation.
Chapter 10 Virtual Death: A Preliminary Phenomenological Analysis

In this chapter, I will focus on what I, informally and at a surface level, refer to as “the death(s) of an avatar” or “an avatar’s death(s)”. I will begin by describing two different kinds of reason for focusing on this particular phenomenon. I will then argue that “the death(s) of an avatar” is both ontologically continuous with and ontologically different than Being-towards-death, and thus can be conceived as virtual death in the sense of virtuality that I propose in chapter 9. Analyzing this phenomenon will also draw into question the traditional phenomenological claims that death has to impend for Dasein only as a unique sort of possibility in order to potentially ground a transition to authentic Being-in-the-world, and that Dasein cannot experience a death that is its own because doing so would involve losing the “thereness” of its Being.

Chapter 11 Virtual Death and Temporality

In this chapter, I will focus on the sense in which virtual death is a temporal phenomenon. I will begin by describing the manner in which virtual death discloses time as something to be reckoned with; and then I discuss what I think would be said about this manner of time-reckoning from a traditional phenomenological point of view. I will then provide my own analysis of the temporality of virtual death, and conclude by discussing what I think is at stake in understanding virtual death as a temporal phenomenon. Ultimately, I will argue that reckoning with time as something quantifiable does not necessarily lead to a derived conception of time, and that the temporality of virtuality (as I have conceived it) allows Dasein to overcome the limits of its own self-overcoming or transcendence.

Chapter 12 Conclusion

In this final chapter, I will conclude by discussing the relevance of my analysis both to existing studies of MMOGs, and to the phenomenological perspective that provisionally orients Part 2. I will also outline some of the prospects this particular analysis has for further investigation.
6 Preliminary Interpretation of MMOGs

I begin my preliminary interpretation of MMOGs by making two related claims. The first claim is that there are grounds for interpreting MMOGs as *worlds* understood in an existential-ontological sense. The second claim is that there are also grounds for holding that what allows MMOGs to come to presence as worlds is because they exhibit structural features of *worldliness* – the ontological meaning of world understood as an *existentiale* of Dasein.\(^{126}\)

In order to substantiate the two claims of this chapter, it is useful to begin by discussing the traditional phenomenological conceptions of world [Welt] and worldliness [Weltlichkeit]. Note that the following discussion is not intended to provide a thorough account of these two notions, but only to introduce them in a way that will facilitate the subsequent analysis of MMOGs.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger differentiates among a number of conceptions of world in order to isolate the one that he thinks is of foremost importance for understanding the existential-ontological structure of Dasein. For the purposes of existential analysis, Heidegger argues, world should not be understood to name a particular entity or object or being [Seinde], nor should it be understood to designate the totality of beings found within-the-world [innerweltlich Seindes], nor should it be understood as an ontological term referring to the Being of all beings within-the-world. For Heidegger, rather, within the context of existential-ontological analysis, world refers specifically to “that *wherein* a factual Dasein as such can be said to ‘live’”.\(^{127}\) World, in other words, is *das Umwelt* – the world “around and about” Dasein, or the vicinity within which

\(^{126}\)“*Existentiales*” [Existenzialen] is an ontological term designating any aspect or dimension of the Being of Dasein. So, for example, worldliness is an existentiale, fallenness [Verfallenheit] is an existentiale, Being-with is an existentiale, etc. This is different than the term “*existentiell*” [Existentiell] which is an *ontic* expression referring to, for example, goals, projects, and decisions which some particular Dasein may, as a matter of fact, have or not have. I use the term “existentielle”, as Heidegger often does, as a reminder that different aspects of Dasein’s Being ultimately make up the “structural whole” of existence and that, even while these aspects may be isolated for the purposes of inquiry, they cannot be separated, or ultimately treated as separate, from one another.

Dasein carries out day-to-day activities in the ways in which these activities are typically conducted. World, according to this interpretation, is that which human beings constantly find themselves in the midst of, their lived environment, that with which they are familiar and accustomed to a greater or lesser degree. World is the overarching, amorphous region wherein people get out of bed in the morning, drive frustratedly to budget meetings, read a novel, vote, write email, build sandcastles, clean carpets, recycle, break plates while cooking dinner, play football, attend classes, conduct experiments, hike, and otherwise occupy themselves and others in the myriad ways in which human beings generally do.

For Heidegger, a number of features of this concept of world stand out as especially important. The first is that this concept of world (which, again, Heidegger explicitly maintains is not the only one) is inexorably human. In part, what is meant by this is that it is not simply a mistake to conceive of world in the relevant sense as a place isolated from human experience – a region of “matter” constituted by entities that “in themselves” have nothing to do with “us” – but that thinking in this way is a kind of category error. In the way in which they are conceived in *Being and Time*, world and Dasein are inextricably bound up with one another – so much so, in fact, that although Heidegger believes that it is possible to focus on certain elements of world for the purposes of gaining insight into the whole phenomenon of human existence, inquiry into the Being of world is ultimately inquiry into the Being of Dasein itself. This, of course, is the most basic regard in which Heidegger refers to human existence as Being-in-the-world. The Being of Dasein is intrinsically worldly: to be human is to be familiar with an environment that is broadly defined primarily in terms of the activities that are performed “here and there” by humans on a daily basis.

For Heidegger, a second important feature of the existential-ontological concept of world is that the humanness that constitutes world is collective. Broadly speaking, what this means is that the world of everyday human affairs involves an unspecified aggregate of human actors, each with their own projects and daily practices, co-mingling in a space that is essentially shared. This, of course, is not to suggest that individuals “do not exist” or somehow are not relevant but only that, for the most part, the everyday conduct of any particular Dasein is impacted by, and impacts, the conduct of myriad others. Dasein’s daily conduct is in each case practically caught up with the existence of others. World is a public place wherein any particular Dasein completes its projects in conjunction with many others – sometimes cooperatively, sometimes
competitively, sometimes incidentally, sometimes purposively, sometimes accidentally, sometimes indirectly, sometimes implicitly, or in any number of other ways. Expressed in more directly phenomenological terms, the world of Dasein is a with-world. To be Dasein is to be worldly alongside other Dasein (and, of course, other non-Dasein). Insofar as the Being of Dasein is intrinsically worldly, Being-in-the-world is held by Heidegger to be intrinsically Being-with others.

When Heidegger refers to the worldliness [Weltlichkeit] of world, he is referring specifically to the Being of world conceived in an existential-ontological sense. Worldliness, in other words, designates the ontological character of the everyday, lived environment wherein Dasein collectively conducts its day-to-day activities. With that said, however, describing succinctly what actually constitutes worldliness is quite a challenging project. Articulating the meaning of the Being of world with sufficient theoretical rigor, after all, is one of the main objectives of the entire first part of Being and Time (and, of course, not the only place where Heidegger attempts such an articulation). For purposes of this interpretation of MMOGs, however, I believe that it is sufficient to focus initially on two structural moments or existentiales of worldliness in particular: namely, significance [Bedeutsamkeit] and concern [Besorgen].

I.a - Significance

Within the context of Heidegger’s existential analysis, significance is used, almost as a technical term, to designate the condition of Dasein that allows Dasein to occupy the environment in the way in which it does in everyday existence – which is to say, by making use of things, by understanding things practically, by attempting to carry out projects, by encountering others likewise and differently involved, by evaluating the worth of different activities, by trying to carve out a sense of themselves as individuals, etc. More technically, significance refers to “the relational totality of signification” – that which Heidegger holds to be an interlocked and inescapable network of relationships in which Dasein is referred constantly to others and to the

128 Macquarrie and Robinson translate “Weltlichkeit” as “worldhood”, but here I follow Stambaugh’s translation of the term as “worldliness”. This is primarily because I think “worldhood” sounds too much like “a property something may have” whereas “worldliness” connotes, at least to me, the idea of “what it is like to be world” or “what it is like to be worldly”, and I think that this is closer to what Heidegger intends by the term. Nor do I find the concern that Macquarrie and Robinson express on 91 (fn.1) of their translation particularly worrying.
objects it encounters daily in lived experience, and within which the relevance or meaning of particular acts is disclosed.\footnote{129} Broadly speaking, significance refers to the nature of the context Dasein finds itself to be familiar with in virtue of existing – enmeshed in meaningful relationships with things and human beings; both of which correspondingly make demands upon Dasein, and respond to Dasein’s demands, and which involve Dasein in any number of different pragmatic engagements.

Importantly, what drives Heidegger’s analysis of significance is primarily his consideration of the entities with which he argues Dasein first and foremost associates in everyday, lived experience – beings Heidegger refers to as “equipment” [das Zeug], or entities whose way of Being is that of readiness-to-hand [Zuhandenheit].\footnote{130} Here, Heidegger’s claim is that, what Dasein comes across mostly in its surroundings are manipulable things, “tools”, in a broad sense, that it cannot help but find, for example, suitable for some activities but not for others, useful for carrying out certain projects but not useful for others, things that would be useful if only they were not broken, things that might work but which are not quite right either. In other words, what Dasein finds itself among in the world are not “mere” or “brute” things without any relevance or pragmatic potential, “stuff” just mutely occupying space, “matter” without meaning – beings whose way of Being Heidegger refers to as presence-at-hand [Vorhandenheit] – but rather the opposite: things that Dasein can, or already has, put to use; things with pragmatic importance; things that are good, or not so good, for carrying out certain projects. Dasein’s world is configured for the most part by equipment that gets applied in the everyday dealings of Dasein.

According to Heidegger, moreover, what analysis of equipment reveals first and foremost is that there is, strictly speaking, “no such things as an item of equipment or tool”.\footnote{131} This is because, in being handy or available for use, equipment comes to presence in the ways in which it does by making reference to [verweisen] other such equipment, to the uses this other

\footnote{129} Heidegger, Being and Time, 120.

\footnote{130} I prefer “equipment” over “useful things” as a translation for “das Zeug” because the latter suggests that Dasein actually finds all things of this nature useful whereas, in fact and in keeping with Heidegger’s conception of das Zeug, Dasein sometimes finds things in its everyday environment useful, sometimes not so useful, sometimes not useful at all.

\footnote{131} Heidegger, Being and Time, 97.
equipment might have, and to the projects of Dasein collectively taking place in the everyday environment. Equipment, in other words, is always a complex constituted by meaningful arrays of objects that are relegated to tasks and assigned to other such objects according to the manifold needs, desires, goals, oversights, intentions, of human agents putting things to use in the public environment. Chalk, for example, does not just “happen to be” in a university lecture room but “refers” to the chalkboard in the room just as the lights above the board are “assigned” to facilitate writing. The chairs in the room stand where they do because students need to sit not just anywhere or at any level or at some random distance, but at tables where they can write effectively and make legible notes. The notes they produce in turn have the equipmental character of “items useful for studying”; and developing such tools in turn helps a student succeed at obtaining different sorts of goal (getting an “A”, getting into grad-school, getting a good job). Expressed in phenomenological terms, equipment shows the structural characteristic of being “something “in-order-to . . .” [etwas um-zu...]: equipment is something taken up to produce that which is itself usable for something else, and which obtains this useful character by factoring into possibilities of Dasein “for-the-sake-of- which” such activity is for the most part conducted.

I.b - Concern

The second existentiale which it is useful to discuss here is what Heidegger refers to as “concern”. Again, Heidegger uses this term, in something like a technical sense, to refer to the existential-ontological condition that allows Dasein to be concerned with, to be concerned by, and to have concern for, the equipment and others that co-constitute the world around and about Dasein. For Heidegger, concern signifies a pre-theoretical (which is not to say a-theoretical) regard for the collective involvements that characterize Dasein’s worldly dealings. It is, by and

132 For a useful discussion of difficulties with translating “verweisen” in this context as “to refer” and “Verweisung” as “reference” see Heidegger, Being and Time, 97, fn.1. I use refer, relegate, and assign in this paragraph to capture some of the different senses in which I think Heidegger intends the term to be taken.

133 Heidegger, Being and Time, 97.

134 Even while the two terms are closely related, it is important not to confuse concern [Besorgen] with care [Sorge]. Care, in Heidegger’s sense, refers to the existential-ontological meaning of Being-in-the-world as a whole, whereas concern refers, more specifically, to the way in which Dasein is involved with others and equipment in the everyday, lived environment. For example, see Heidegger, Being and Time, 237.
large, *circumspect*, by which Heidegger means, in part, that concern is already apparent before it tends to become evident; and, in part, that concern is, in a broad sense, what “motivates” Dasein’s everyday dealings even while it tends not to be explicitly taken as a theme for these activities themselves. What Dasein tends to be concerned with, for example, is not concern itself but, rather, submitting taxes on time, finishing an essay, picking up the kids from daycare, not burning dinner, getting rid of mice in the house, and so on. And yet nonetheless, holds Heidegger, having the ontological character of concern is what makes it possible for Dasein to take its own projects, the projects of others, and the useful objects collectively on hand to complete such tasks to be significant in the ways in which Dasein naturally does. Concern is concern for getting things accomplished, concern with achieving certain ends, concern for possible outcomes and, ultimately, Heidegger argues, concern with actually existing in one way or another.

This final point is worth emphasizing. For in the same way that Heidegger holds that the equipmental character of useful things refers ultimately to possibilities of Dasein, so too does he hold concern to be ultimately concern regarding the day-to-day activities of Dasein. For Heidegger, in other words, what is at stake for Dasein, in the final analysis, are possible ways in which Dasein can collectively be. Concern is, therefore, necessarily concern for how to navigate seemingly endless networks of relationships in order to carry out projects in the way envisioned. Concern means dealing with others and with their own characteristic involvements in the world. Concern is not just concern for one or for one’s Dasein, but concern that has to take account of others – with what others do, with what others intend, with what they fear, want, desire, and with how they too manipulate the meaningful arrays of useful equipment that are collectively used to meet the challenges of daily existence.

**II**

Keeping in mind the phenomenological concepts outlined in the previous section, I will now begin my preliminary interpretation of MMOGs by arguing that there are grounds for understanding MMOGs as *worlds* understood in the relevant existential-ontological sense.
The first thing to note about MMOGs is that in ordinary, everyday, lived experience they tend to be *concretely familiar* to those participating in this kind of game. Primarily, what I mean by this is that people who login to a MMOG are inclined to find that which appears before them to some degree recognizable, accessible, sensible, or explicable – something that they can, in a broad sense, integrate into an existing mindset no matter how fantastic, supernatural, surprising or “other-worldly” what appears may also seem to them to be. When it does come about, recognition tends to happen unproblematically, almost automatically, and does not require concentrated effort or even much deliberation. What it is that those who “get” MMOGs “get” typically arrives without delay or hesitation or intervention. *Familiarity* in this context thus means both that there is something very broadly “recognizable to one” about MMOGs, and something recognized “at once” when it is apprehended. In being *concretely* familiar, however, I also mean that MMOGs tend to be familiar because *they themselves* seem to possess elements or features with which people in general are, to greater or lesser degrees, accustomed or conversant. MMOGs engender familiarity through particularities they exhibit at first glance – points of contact or detail that stand out as being part of a sensible whole (some of which I discuss below).

For the most part, those who login to a MMOG do not find themselves confronted by an utterly foreign and chaotic wash of noise, activity, and color “less even than a dream” (Kant); nor do they find a collection of “mere pixels” that they must struggle from the start to synthesize into a coherent whole. Conversely, they by and large, and normally right away, discover phenomena that they just cannot help but comprehend in a rough-and-ready way – even if such phenomena are not explicitly understood or grasped in their full significance until long after the initial moments of apprehension. MMOGs do not tend to strike people as radically alien or jarringly strange, even while people might be equally “in the dark” about exactly what it is they have found themselves to be accustomed to. Those who login to *World of Warcraft*, for example, tend to recognize right away that it is possible to move around in the regions they see, even if they do not know exactly how to move. They tend to intuit that there are destinations available, even if they do not know where to go. They tend to recognize that they can do things, even if they do not know what to do. They tend to expect there to be means for accomplishing something, even if they do not know how to accomplish what they want. They tend to recognize that purposeful activity is going on around them, even if they do not know how to join in.
For the moment, I am going to focus on three kinds of phenomenon that enable MMOGs to be experienced in everydayness as concretely familiar: what I am going to refer to, respectively, as their environmentality, equipmentality, and sharedness.

In part, MMOGs tend to be concretely familiar because they appear to be composed of locations whose characteristics, purposes, boundaries, and connections tend to be intuitively grasped. In ordinary, everyday, lived experience what those who participate in a MMOG come across seem to be areas, destinations or domains that they are readily acquainted with: roads, bridges, workshops, churches, graveyards, farmers’ fields, villages, ruins, market-places, deserts, inns, cities. These locations are environmental in the sense that they appear for the most part to “have to do” with the kinds of activity commonly taking place in MMOGs – they are locations which, for example, help to orient those travelling from one place to another, often appear suitable for certain kinds of activity and not so much for others, are associated with being conducive to certain kinds of mood or emotional state, seem likely to host some events but not others, and often unproblematically fit (or do not fit) into the projects, tasks, goals and desires that people commonly have while participating in a MMOG. In order to sell goods in Azeroth, for example, one has to make use of the environment in the right way – travel to a hub of activity such as Stormwind Keep and not to a place devoid of commerce such as the Plaguelands. To become a successful miner requires heading off into the mountains and searching for ore, not hanging around the markets of Dalaran City. To get to where ore is likely to appear, one has to know which paths to travel and how to get to them – to turn Southeast just past Falcon Hold, drop into the gorge while avoiding the Great Fissure, and searching West until one hits the Den of Haal’esh. MMOGs come to presence as concretely familiar in part because they appear to be constituted by myriad contexts within which purposeful activity can be carried out, and within which such activity makes more or less intuitive sense.

 MMOGs are also concretely familiar in part because what is for the most part discovered within the locations of which they seem to be composed are things which appear to have pragmatic value, manipulable things, or things capable of being put to use. In ordinary, everyday, lived experience, what is discovered while people participate in a MMOG are sensible, organized collections of apparently useful things – not things which appear to be “merely” present or which inertly occupy part of someone’s visual field, but which seem capable of being handled in specific ways and of factoring into what goes on while people participate. These things
sometimes fit easily into projects that are underway, and sometimes thwart attempts to put them to use. They sometimes have clear and overt applications but sometimes are found to be more recalcitrant. Sometimes these things function properly, but sometimes they appear to be broken and themselves in need of repair. What is discovered for the most part in the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed, in other words, appears to be equipment in a relatively straightforward phenomenological sense: staircases that can be traversed, chairs that can be sat on, boats which can be missed while trying to cross an ocean, docks from where boats depart, mailboxes where people can obtain their mail, bookshelves to store books, ovens to cook, forges to smelt iron, candles, coats, and multitudinous other things that, for the most part, seamlessly get taken up and applied in the everyday dealings of those participating in a MMOG. In this sense, MMOGs are home to predominantly pragmatic activity.

MMOGs also tend to be concretely familiar in part because both the locations of which they seem to be composed, and the equipment apparently of use within these regions, do not come to presence for any particular individual alone – not for me, not for you, not for anyone in isolation – but for “one in general”. In ordinary, everyday, lived experience, MMOGs are shared in the sense that they are composed of regions of collective involvement, of areas organized to facilitate the interconnected dealings of an indefinite many. The shared quality of MMOGs is most evident in the activity of others that takes place alongside one’s own activities. Others occupy the same locations that one does, and often for mostly the same reasons; others make use of the same tools one makes use of, and basically in the same way; others participate in the same events, perhaps in a better or worse fashion. In a MMOG, others are constantly in the vicinity: talking with one as one waits on the dock for a boat, getting in one’s way as one tries to enter a bank, undercutting one’s prices in an auction, assisting one to complete an important quest, laughing at someone else who falls off the docks and misses the boat.

Even when, as a matter of fact, one finds oneself to be alone in a MMOG, there is always the possibility of coming into contact with others, of having one’s own activities impacted by others, of having others “suddenly appear” for good or for ill – of having the goods one intended to buy in an auction snatched up by another, of having one’s plans interrupted by someone hostile, of having one’s reverie broken by others camping near a favorite fishing hole. Similarly, even when, as a matter of fact, no one else is making use of the equipment that one makes use of, the usefulness of the tools which commonly come to presence in a MMOG is not circumscribed
by the uses that any particular person in isolation can make of them, but for the uses they hold for “one in general”. Boats arriving at the docks appear equally for all who might want to use them. The moat around Stormwind Keep prevents an indefinite many from getting in unless they use the bridge. The Mana Loom in the lower-levels of Shatterath City is available for any who need access (unless someone else is already using it). MMOGs are shared in the sense that they appear to be composed of regions that facilitate the activities of an unspecified aggregate whose projects and daily practices mesh in manifold both obvious and implicit ways.

Insofar as MMOGs are experienced in everydayness as concretely familiar environments that are themselves shared sites of primarily pragmatic conduct, there are grounds for interpreting MMOGs as worlds understand in the existential-ontological sense outlined in the previous section. When world itself is conceived as an amorphous region that is home to common practices arising largely through the collective use of equipment, then so too do MMOGs initially appear to be worlds in this phenomenological sense. Although the situation actually turns out to be quite a bit more complicated than this, taking MMOGs to be worlds is one way of initially understanding the environmental, equipmental and shared character of this particular phenomenal region.

But what is it that allows Dasein to encounter MMOGs as concretely familiar pragmatic shared environments? How is it that MMOGs can come to be experienced in such a way? What makes them intuitively recognizable as domains of collective, purposeful, pragmatic activity? My answer to these questions is going to be that it is not because of ontic resemblance but because of ontological continuity. It is, or so I will claim, because these concretely familiar pragmatic shared environments themselves exhibit structural features of worldliness that they can be apprehended in the ways which have been discussed in this section. Broadly speaking, in other words, the claim that I will both explain in further detail and defend in what follows is that it is partly in virtue of “their” worldliness, and partly because of the ontological constitution of Dasein itself, that those who participate in a MMOG tend to find them to be concretely familiar pragmatic shared environments.
III

One sensible view which might be thought to account for how MMOGs are encountered in daily experience is that we tend to find such worldly regions intuitively recognizable because they exhibit characteristics which “look like” or resemble properties of “real” pragmatic shared environments of the kind we constantly find ourselves in the midst of here on Earth. This view would propose that we tend to intuitively regard, for example, the ships and docks and ovens that we come across while participating in a MMOG as kinds of ships and docks and ovens because these “ontically resemble” the ships and docks and ovens which we comes across daily in “the” world. Similarly, this view would propose that we tend to intuitively treat avatars as some sort of bearers of purposeful activity because avatars tend to have observable features in common with what we typically take other human agents to look like. Expressed schematically, this view would hold that we have a propensity to regard or treat X as a Φ because X looks to us like or has properties in common with Y, which actually is Φ. This view is ontic in the sense that it is based upon observation of the properties or characteristics of beings and some of the (alleged) facts about them. Here, the term “ontic” is being used in a traditional phenomenological sense to refer to entities and their attributes rather than to the Being of such entities.

Although I believe that such a view is intuitively plausible, the view that I am actually going to defend – and which forms the substrate of this dissertation from this point forward – is that the worldly relationship between MMOGs and “the” world goes much deeper than ontic similarity – so much deeper, in fact, that even this sensible way of articulating the relationship will ultimately need to be challenged. My view, rather, is that MMOGs tend to come to presence as concretely familiar pragmatic shared environments because MMOGs are a region of phenomena which exhibit both significance and concern – aspects of the meaning of world conceived in an existential-ontological sense. Let me explain.
Consider the following sketch of one kind of practice that commonly takes place in all sorts of MMOG. Suppose that I login to *World of Warcraft* and, after getting suitably acquainted with the basic goals and objectives of the game, inquire how I can make enough gold to buy equipment that I suspect I will need to venture into areas of the game that are further afield. I am told that alchemy is a lucrative profession, not too difficult to master, and so I decide to try and become an alchemist in order to fund my future explorations. Imagining what it is like to be an alchemist, entertaining thoughts of what it is like to play such a role, do very little towards making the desired outcome happen. What I have to do, rather, is get to work. First of all I have to find a trainer capable of teaching me the apprentice skills I require to make the components required for basic potions. I have to be able to afford the fee for being trained, and buy the basic recipes. Since I’m told that trainers tend to be found at cities and other major landmarks, I head to Stormwind Keep, consult my map, and then discover that the trainer I am looking for is actually East of the keep, in Elwynn Forest. After tracking down Alchemist Mallory, I have to go out and locate the herbs required in sufficient quantity to improve my skills. At this point, it is worth my time to do some basic research: discussing with others either via text or voice-chat what herbs grow where, following others apparently also gathering herbs so I learn the most efficient routes, exploring different regions of the forest and keeping track of the locations where herbs seem to grow. Mixing potions requires at first only the requisite herbs, some purified water and empty flasks, and is capable of being completed “in the field”. But soon I learn that in order to become a better alchemist I have to make use of a Philosopher’s Stone – an item which must be crafted using iron bars which in turn need to be bought from a smith or found at auction. So I head from the wilderness to Dalaran City with the hopes of finding someone to help me out. The smith I find in Dalaran agrees to make me iron bars but only on the condition of being given some Superior Healing Potions. Now I have to travel back from Dalaran into the Hinterlands to find a relatively obscure reagent called Khadgar's Whisker. This means that I have to walk from Dalaran to Valiance Keep, take a boat back to Stormwind and then fly north into the mountains. After finally obtaining the last element required for the potions I must make, I discover that the smith I made contact with has logged off. Instead of waiting for his

\[135\] In describing this practice in deliberative but basically natural language I am attempting to preserve a sense of how this sort of case would manifest in everyday experience. This means intentionally glossing over some complexities which will be discussed later, and some which will be outlined as issues to be addressed in the future.
return, I fly directly to Stormwind, place the potions I made in the auction house and wait for them to sell so that I can earn enough money to buy the iron bars I need. The process may have taken me hours or days or weeks or longer depending on my ability to navigate the world, my understanding of the basic requirements of alchemy, my contacts, and my existing wealth in Azeroth.

Even in this rough sketch it is possible to discern both elements of the traditional phenomenological notion of worldliness outlined on p. 94–97. First, significance is evident in the interlocked network of relationships involving both other items of equipment and other human agents which allow that which is manipulated in my pragmatic dealings to be used in the ways in which they actually are. The recipes I need to procure are useful for producing potions; the potions I make consist of the herbs I have collected; that which is produced from these herbs is useful for negotiating with others; others are needed in order to make the iron ingots I require for a Philosopher’s Stone. Similarly, the boat I take from Valiance Keep to Stormwind is useful for ferrying me quickly across an ocean, but the boat does not just “happen to be there” waiting for me in particular at the docks, but arrives in order to get “one in general” quickly from one point to another. The travels I take are oriented by the instructions others have given me on where to locate what I seek, but also by the goal I have of becoming a successful alchemist. Each “item” of equipment involved in the tasks described shows structural characteristics of being “something “in-order-to”…” and is enmeshed within an equipmental totality wherein it obtains specific relevance. That which gets put to use in these activities has the character of the ready-to-hand; just as what allows such equipment and others to come to presence as they do is a complex of references and assignments which create context for this particular kind of pragmatic activity.

Second, concern is evident in the example discussed as concern with and concern for the equipment and others involved both directly and indirectly in the dealings in which I participate. In the case described, I am concerned with finding the herbs I need because I care about making certain potions. I care about making certain potions because I care about becoming a better alchemist. I care how the tools I need to purchase function because I am concerned with making sure my products sell. Others are a matter of concern in part because of the manifold ways in which they might help or hinder my activities: teaching me something I care to learn (such as where to find Khadgar's Whiskers), helping me to create something I care about (such as a Philosopher’s Stone), inconveniencing me by making me deal with what I do not first and
foremost care about (such as by demanding I make them potions instead of paying them directly for some iron ingots). Concern is manifest in the example as circumspective concern for achieving ends using the equipment available for indefinitely many; but it also manifests as concern for being a certain way: namely, for being someone who is capable of gaining the means and skills to explore different regions of a particular MMOG on the way to becoming a better alchemist. What is also at stake in the example, then, are possible ways in which I can be within a particular concretely familiar pragmatic shared environment. Having such concerns, however, means not having concern for myself alone, but also for others that posses their own characteristic concerns – for others who are likewise caught up in purposeful activities that make use of the equipment available to them, and which are equally impacted in myriad ways by an indefinite collective.

IV

To summarize, then, what I take the previous analysis to show is that there are not only grounds for taking MMOGs to be worlds, but also grounds for holding that why these domains tend to be experienced as concretely familiar pragmatic shared environments is because they themselves exhibit existentialies of worldliness. Both significance and concern appear to underwrite the extent to which MMOGs can be intuitively grasped as worlds in the relevant existential-ontological sense. To state the same point in slightly different terms, my view is that worldliness is an ontological category MMOGs attest to of themselves in virtue of being taken in everyday experience to be familiar, shared, lived environments.

Insofar as this view, however, is really only intended to provide a point of departure for the phenomenological analysis that develops subsequently – i.e., because it is not intended to actually solve any of the problems of understanding MMOGs phenomenologically, but only to establish grounds for raising the right sorts of question – it is especially important to be clear about what I am claiming and not claiming at this point in the chapter as a whole.

Here, I am arguing that there are grounds for holding that MMOGs world. How, to what extents, in what regards, and to what ends MMOGs world; or what are the ontological characteristics of this kind of worldliness in particular – at this point, these are open questions. With that being said, however, in claiming that MMOGs are worldly in an existential-ontological sense, I am not claiming that MMOGs world in the same way as what is typically referred to as
“the” world worlds. That is something we are not yet in position to reflect on.\textsuperscript{136} And we also perhaps ought to wonder at this point whether or not phenomenology is even up to the task of thinking worlds worlding in different ways. That too is an open question.\textsuperscript{137}

It is also important not to confuse the interpretation I have defended thus far for several similar-sounding and intuitively plausible theses. Although I am claiming that MMOGs world, this is not equivalent to claiming that MMOGs are real worlds, or that they are “as real as” the (real) world. Nor is my view equivalent to claiming that MMOGs are \textit{not} real worlds, or that they are \textit{not} “as real as” the (real) world. Nor am I saying that, in appearing to be composed of concretely familiar pragmatic shared environments, MMOGs only \textit{seem} to be real worlds, or that they only \textit{seem} to be “as real as” the (real) world. Nor am I saying that, in appearing to be composed of concretely familiar pragmatic shared environment, MMOGs do not seem to be real worlds, or that they do not seem to be “as real as” the (real) world. Conversely, and as has been discussed, the claims that ground my preliminary interpretation intentionally take place at a level of discourse prior to differentiating real from non-real. This, of course, is one of the hallmarks of the phenomenological tradition I am provisionally following at this point. As we will also see, however, to follow through on phenomenological \textit{epoche} in this particular context is ultimately going to push on this tradition and what is accessible to it.

\textsuperscript{136} To foreshadow, in chapter 8 I claim that MMOGs \textit{do not world} in a way that is identical to “the” world. This turns out to be crucial for their virtuality in the sense I propose in chapter 9.

\textsuperscript{137} It is perhaps already possible to see how Heidegger’s expression “In-\textit{der-welt-sein}” [Being-in-the-world] may turn out to be problematic for the purposes of this analysis of MMOGs. The question is whether or not we are going to need at some point to get past the definite article “der”, or else to understand the scope of this article in a wider sense than Heidegger is normally taken to mean when he refers to the Being of “\textit{der Welt}” or \textit{the} world. Perhaps a more fruitful way of understanding Dasein in this context would be as ‘\textit{In-welts-sein}’ or ‘Being-in-worlds’?
7 Interpreting MMOGs as Places

In the previous chapter, I argued that there were grounds for interpreting MMOGs as worlds because MMOGs themselves exhibit structural features of worldliness. This chapter has three related objectives. First, I extend the preliminary interpretation of MMOGs developed in chapter 6 by arguing that there are three reasons for interpreting the locations of which these worlds appear to be composed as places in a sense that recalls Heidegger’s use of the term “Gegenden”. Second, I argue that the phenomenological framework that has been provisionally followed thus far in Part 2 of this dissertation would have a difficult time explaining how it has become possible for human beings to encounter these locations as places in the relevant sense. Finally, I propose a way of thinking about Dasein and avatars that I refer to as conjuncture: a way of understanding how Dasein and avatars function together at an existential-ontological level in order to enable Dasein to encounter MMOGs as worlds understood in an existential-ontological sense.

I

Observation suggests that the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed are typically received in everyday experience as heterogeneous, interconnected domains that are contoured over time in part because of purposeful, collective activity. In this section I will discuss each of these three aspects in turn: heterogeneity, interconnectedness, and contour.

First, what I mean by calling these locations heterogeneous is that MMOGs typically appears to consist of organized regions that are differentiated from, and related to, one another by a wide variety of sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, sometimes distinct and sometimes hazy, sometimes malleable and sometimes firm characteristics and boundaries. Although the list is by no means exhaustive, what those participating in a MMOG commonly come across are:

- Territories that are defended by individuals and/or groups against an intruder or intruders representing an opposed power or interest. In Warhammer Online, for example, territories are assigned to one of two factions – Order or Destruction – each of which is defended in turn by three armies representing three different racial groups: Dwarves, Humans and High
Elves on the side of Order; and Greenskins, Chaos and Dark Elves on the side of Destruction.

- **Districts** that are defined by the social or economic status of those living there. In *EverQuest 2*, for example, those visiting the city of Neriak are confined to the immigrant quarter until they complete a citizenship quest which grants them unrestricted access to the other districts which make up the city.

- **Regions** that are defined by geographic features: mountains such as Rathe and Storm Peaks, oceans such as the Ocean of Tears and Iceclad, swamps such as Innothule and the Swamp of Sorrows, forests such as Ashenvale and Kithicor, plains such as The Shimmering Flats and Karana, jungles such as The Emerald Jungle and Stranglethorn Vale, volcanic regions such as The Blasted Lands and Lavastorm.

- **Expanses** that are categorized according to the appearance of a dominant climate. For example, in *World of Warcraft*, there is the arctic region of Northrend, the sub-arctic area of Winterspring, the tropical savanna of The Barrens, the steppes of Mulgore, the rain forests of the Sholazar Basin, and the desert of Tanaris.

- **Sites** that are defined by the relative extent of organized social, political, economic, military, and cultural activity: civilized areas, domesticated or cultivated but still “natural” environments, wildernesses, temporary habitations, permanent residences, rural areas, urban environments, suburban sprawl, graveyards, etc.

- **Neighborhoods** divided according to the kind of activity that takes place in them, such as residential areas, financial or trade zones, entertainment districts, slums.


- **Monuments** that seem to allow that which is not itself present to have a kind of presence in the world in question: monuments to ancestors, monuments to founders, monuments to supernatural powers, monuments to other people, etc.

- **Signs of “faulty” agency** such as shipwrecks, zeppelin crashes, ancient ruins, charred buildings, overgrown paths, and abandoned buildings.
• *Traces* of catastrophes of various kind: rifts caused by the impact of celestial bodies, lands ruined by plague, regions destroyed by war, etc.

In addition to being heterogeneous, the locations of which MMOGs appear to consist are *interconnected* in the sense that they are also characterized by arrays of routes of various kind: highways, arterials, collectors, local streets, alleys, junctures, pathways, trails. Sometimes these routes connect centres of attraction or areas of assembly with one another. Sometimes they provide “byways” that allow knowledgeable participants to circumnavigate densely populated areas. Sometimes these routes are preplanned and clearly marked. Sometimes they are invented in an off-hand way and indicated only obscurely. Sometimes they present expeditious means for traveling from one location to another. Sometimes they pass by points of interest or “sights” that are “off the beaten path”. Sometimes these routes “just end” unexpectedly, but most often they terminate in a sensible way – such as at a destination where collective activity tends to happen.

Here, the underlying point is that the presence, absence, and character of such interconnected routes help the locations of a MMOG come to presence in the ways in which they typically do in everyday experience. For example, in *World of Warcraft*, Stormwind Keep is typically experienced by those participating in this particular MMOG as a hub of economic activity. In part, what enables Stormwind to come to presence in this particular way are the four paved and clearly demarcated main roads that connect the three districts and the only gate of Stormwind to a centralized plaza populated by buildings which facilitate economic activity (such as a bank and an auction house). By effectively “channeling” visitors to Stormwind Keep to the plaza in question, these routes help people conduct trades and transfer funds efficiently, thus contributing to the way in which Stormwind itself tends to be experienced by those participating in *World of Warcraft*. If these roads were not there at all, or if they were substantially different (say, smaller or poorly defined) the predominant activity of this particular location would change and, with it, the way in which this particular location tends to be intuitively recognized.

Conversely, the absence of an established network of clearly defined roads is in part what makes The Barrens come to presence as a relatively “wild” and untamed region. In The Barrens, what one comes across for the most part are only dusty, ill-marked paths – trails that periodically disappear only to reappear some small distance away. In part for this reason, collective activity in The Barrens tends to be relatively disperse: what happens takes place all over the region in small pockets of incidental contact rather than in a concentrated area accommodating a particular
set of focused interests. It is this which in part enables The Barrens to come to presence as more remote than, say, Stormwind Keep – less organized, more unruly, more untamed, more wild.

The third and final feature I want to discuss is what I refer to as the *contour* of the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed. Let me first explain what I mean by this term.

It is undeniable that how the heterogeneous, interconnected regions of a MMOG are experienced is in large part due to the ways in which such regions are designed, programmed, and rendered – how they are sketched, coded, animated, modeled, rigged, lit, shadowed, and laid-out by those involved with the development of the software needed in order to participate in this particular kind of pragmatic shared environment. Alongside the development and implementation of such software, however, it is also true that the actual activity of those participating collectively in such worlds plays – to greater or lesser extents in different cases – an integral role in shaping how these regions come to presence in common, everyday experience. What gives these locations what I will refer to as their contour are the collective practices and daily activities that, over time, help to determine the exact figure or definition of a particular heterogeneous and interconnected region. In essence, there are two kinds of element that contribute primarily to how the locations of a MMOG are received: on one hand, there is the work of the development team that puts in place the basic building blocks for how a location is experienced; and, on the other hand, there is the collective activity of those working, communicating, competing, cooperating, playing, ignoring, and influencing each other which helps to determine the characteristic texture of the location at hand.

Importantly, and as I indicated previously, the extent to which contour determines how a location appears often varies in different cases. Sometimes the design and implementation of a region is nearly completely constitutive for how it is experienced. For example, it is for the most part not possible for those participating in a MMOG to collectively create new paths or roads or otherwise affect the geography of a particular area (say, by trampling down fields or by turning a hill into rubble through extensive mining). In other cases, however, collective activity is able to play a more marked role. For example, for the release of the first expansion pack for *World of Warcraft*, the developers designed and implemented a new city, Shatterath, one of whose main purposes was to provide a central staging area for activities involving the new regions of the
world that became available at the launch of the expansion. This city included a number of facilities which were unavailable in any other city at the time: quick means of travel to “old” regions of the world, access to new quests and items, opportunities to fly from one area to another, contact with new factions with new political and social interests, etc. Because Shatterath was specifically created in order to accommodate people’s interests in ways in which other cities at the time did not, it naturally became, as intended, the new hub of social and economic activity in this particular MMOG. In this case, although the design and implementation of this region played a crucial role in how it tended to be experienced, it is nonetheless true that if people had not actually responded to Shatterath’s introduction by, for example, meeting there, using it to access other locations, becoming interested in the political and social opportunities introduced by the region, the city would not have actually come to presence as it tended to do: namely, as the new, social and economic centre of this particular pragmatic shared environment.

On the other end of the spectrum there are cases such as what came to be known, in *EverQuest*, as the East Commons tunnel bazaar – a location that came to be experienced in a particular way primarily because of a sophisticated set of interrelated and collective practices that took place there over time. When *EverQuest* initially launched in 1999 no one, including the developers, knew that the buying and selling of in-game commodities and currency would become one of the primary focuses of the collective activity taking place in this particular MMOG. For this reason, the developers had not designed and programmed a clearly defined trade district or financial region into the world. As trade evolved in many disparate locations with no centralized point of contact among buyers and sellers, however, the absence of such a trade district came to be of real detriment to those attempting to buy and sell goods. In response to this (and, it is worth noting, not as a result of a decision made by any particular person or group) those interested in buying and selling goods on the continent of Antonica started gathering, first on Sundays and eventually on every day of the week, in a set of tunnels connecting the East Commonlands to the Northern Deserts of Ro. What gradually evolved was a bazaar with a set of norms and practices that governed not only trade but broader social interactions in the area. The bazaar became recognized, for example, not only as a good location

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138 An expansion pack is software which upgrades a pre-existing application typically by adding new locations, abilities, quests, items, and other content to a MMOG. The expansion pack described here is *The Burning Crusade*. 
to determine the value of goods, but as a good area in which to receive beneficial enchantments from others. Fighting was generally forbidden unless completed in pre-arranged (and subsequently often well-attended) duels outside the tunnels themselves, and those who tended to disrupt the bazaar – either by, for example, attempting to steal goods or cheat others – were blacklisted and therefore generally found it more difficult to buy or divest themselves of goods. In this case, how this particular region tended to come to presence was due primarily to the collective practices that evolved there over time. With that being said, however, it is also true that the design and implementation of the tunnels themselves also played a role in fostering the kinds of practice which helped define the contour of the area. The tunnels, for example, were already used as a major conduit for people traveling from Southern Antonica to Western Antonica before the bazaar itself emerged. They provided a natural defense against aggressive creatures located in the area, and they had certain hard-coded features that made it easy for people to conduct trades efficiently.  

A second feature of contour worth emphasizing is that the contributions of each element described previously are not static in MMOGs, but tend to change over time and, in changing, are capable of altering the characteristic texture of a region. For example, before The Burning Crusade, the city of Ironforge (for various reasons) tended to be experienced by those participating in World of Warcraft as one of the centres of Alliance social and economic activity. Now, however, it tends to be received by those visiting the area as little more than a “ghost town” – a vast enclosure of sparsely populated halls curiously absent of the large numbers who, it seems, should be interacting with one another in the area. And this is so despite the fact that the design and implementation of the area itself has not changed or been programmed any differently. What changed, rather, was that the collective practices which formerly helped to define the area dissipated as people moved on to Shatterath, leaving in their wake a palpable alteration in how Ironforge itself was intuitively received.

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139 For example, the tunnels were lit by torches that people used to identify and locate traders. Getting to the bazaar early enough to secure a position by one of the torches near the entrance practically guaranteed additional sales.

140 Ironically, and perhaps inevitably, Shatterath suffered a similar fate at the hands of Dalaran City when the second World of Warcraft expansion was released.
Not surprisingly, it is also true that programming and developmental changes can also lead to significant alterations in the kinds of collective practice which help shape the contour of a region. For example, when *World of Warcraft* was first released, the developers’ intention was to have the city of Orgrimmar function as the capital of Horde activity in Northern Durotar. Because the city was perceived by those actually participating in the region to be unnecessarily complicated and difficult to navigate, however, participants tended to visit Orgrimmar only in order to catch a zeppelin to the Undercity. Orgrimmar itself stood mostly empty and desolate. As a result, the surrounding areas were largely considered under-populated and of little interest to those focusing on the kinds of social interactions possible in a MMOG. In response to the lack of collective activity in the region, the city of Orgrimmar was redesigned by the development team, basically from the ground up: the layout of important buildings was changed, new interconnected routes were placed at locations that tended to see most use, new facilities were added to make the city more desirable. Gradually, the changes made on the programming side were accepted by those actually participating in the world, and the way in which the city itself was experienced altered as a result. As intended, the city “flourished” and took on the character of a principle destination for those traveling and interacting in this region. In this case, there was a kind of reciprocity between the two elements primarily involved in how a location comes to presence – changes inspired by (a lack of) collective activity, and resolved by alterations in the software which came to fruition only as people changed their practices in particular ways.

In this respect, it is also important to emphasize that the kinds of alteration discussed previously can be found to be genuinely alarming by those participating in a MMOG. Significant changes in the contour of a location are often experienced as something of an upheaval for those participating in a MMOG. One example of this is provided by the introduction of The Nexus in *EverQuest*. The Nexus is a location that is often held by long-time participants in this particular pragmatic shared environment to have caused the destruction of much of the contour of the “old world” of Antonica. By allowing people to move freely between areas originally at great distances from one another, and by introducing a feature-rich, dedicated, and efficient trade zone, The Nexus did not just shift the balance of activity from one location to another, but in many regions caused collective activity to cease entirely. The East Commonlands tunnel bazaar (and others like it) collapsed. Other competing cities such as Freeport and Qeynos were nearly deserted in favor of The Nexus, and collective activity in areas of the world not immediately
connected to The Nexus transportation portals diminished in the extreme. What is telling about these changes is that they had a significant effect on how this particular pragmatic shared environment was received as a whole. Among long-time participants in this world, it was not difficult to detect a genuine sense of nostalgia for the East Commonlands bazaar even as it collapsed: a feeling that something valuable had been lost by the Nexus’ new system of convenient, rapid transportation, and a sense that the deserted cities were somehow missed, despite their comparative inefficiencies and shortcomings.

To take this final point a step further, many even maintained that The Nexus “trivialized” practices that were, at one time, held to be quite important by those participating in this MMOG. For example, when *EverQuest* originally launched to the public, traveling overland from the city of Qeynos to the city of Freeport was something akin to a “rite of passage” that proved participants could not only survive but competently navigate through different, interconnected and basically hostile regions of this world. By allowing participants to transport directly from one city to another, the Nexus made such overland journeys obsolete. As a consequence, not only did this particular “rite of passage” fade from common practice, those who had themselves undertaken this journey often maintained that The Nexus had made it possible for newcomers to *EverQuest* to get around without even having to learn basic survival and navigational skills.

II

So far in this chapter, I have focused on describing the extent to which the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed are received in everyday experience as heterogeneous, interconnected domains that are shaped over time in part because of purposeful, collective activity. In this section, I will argue that there are three reasons for further interpreting these locations as places in a sense which recalls Heidegger’s use of the term “Gegenden”. Before I begin, however, let me say a few words about this term itself.
II.a – About the term “Gegenden”

Although “Gegenden” is often translated as “regions”, I will use the term “places” in the argument that will follow. In this respect, although I often treat expressions such as “areas”, “domains”, “regions”, “locations”, and “zones” as roughly synonymous, I reserve “places” as something akin to a technical term to designate the condition of “being locational” in the way in which I will subsequently argue the locations of a MMOG are locational. There are two main reasons I prefer “places” over “regions” (or other viable expressions).

The first reason is because “place” can function in English as a noun and a verb. One can speak, for example, of Niagara Falls being a nice place to visit, or of placing a child in daycare, or of having been placed in a private school against one’s wishes. In my view, this flexibility is useful because it helps to facilitate the idea that referring to something as “a” place may not only involve conceiving of “it” as some kind of thing, but may also include the idea that the place in question is constituted by some kind of activity. This, of course, is not to say that one cannot use the word “place” to refer only to a thing of some sort; or that one cannot use the world “place” to describe only a particular kind of act – but that if one does not quite want to mean either one or the other of these, or both at the same time, the word “place” accommodates such usage better than, say, the words “region” or “area”.

The second reason is because I believe that, in comparison to expressions such as “regions” or “areas”, the term “places” better recalls in English the particular existential-ontological meaning Heidegger assigns to the German “Gegenden”. Broadly speaking, for Heidegger, “Gegenden” refers to the “whereabouts” or the “environmental spaces” that concern Dasein circumspectively in everyday activity. In this sense, “Gegenden” is a concept that plays two crucial and inter-related roles in Heidegger’s thought.

On one hand, Gegenden are conceived as that which makes it possible for objects and others to be encountered by Dasein as belonging somewhere, as having a suitable location, of “fitting in” or of “being at home” (as well as having the converse character of, for example, not...

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141 Both Macquarrie and Robinson and Stambaugh, for example, translate “Gegend” as “region” and “Gegenden” as “regions”.
belonging somewhere or not fitting in). Gegenden are the sites wherein any particular array of equipment obtains a certain kind of arrangement – which is to say, is grasped by Dasein as an array that makes sense and can be put to appropriate (or inappropriate) use within an environment shared by indefinitely many others. Gegenden provide equipment and those making use of such equipment contexts for meaningful interaction.

On the other hand, Gegenden are also and correspondingly conceived by Heidegger to be that which orient Dasein by enabling Dasein to take up and use the equipment it discovers in ways which make sense given the shared contexts provided. Gegenden help to guide Dasein’s activities by facilitating action in certain ways and not in others.\(^{142}\) They help to configure the possibilities open to Dasein by both enabling and restricting what it makes sense for Dasein to do within a pragmatic shared environment. For Heidegger, then, we can speak both of objects and others as Having a place, and of Dasein itself as being placed because of the Gegenden which in part constitute Dasein’s Being-in-the-world.

**II.b – Interpreting MMOGs as Places**

My claim, then, is that there are three reasons for interpreting the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed as places in a sense which recalls Heidegger’s existential-ontological understanding of Gegenden.

First, these locations play a crucial role in organizing the inter-related arrays of apparently useful things discovered in them. Simply put, these locations provide contexts in which equipment is encountered by those participating in a MMOG as equipment of such-and-such kind. They help enable certain items of equipment to come to presence as legitimately useful, help make other items of equipment appear not to fit in, assist in showing some things to be exactly what the situation demands, and help make others come to presence as completely useless. In a MMOG, equipment is not placed randomly about waiting for any possible use, but is itself located by the areas in which it is found – installed in surroundings which contribute to

\(^{142}\) In this sense, it might be said that Gegenden ground what are often referred to as “affordances” in theories of electronic digital computing technologies in general. See, for example, James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (London: Psychology Press, 1986) and Donald Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
the ways in which what comes to presence is intuitively recognized. For example, in a MMOG, if one is looking to use a forge, one starts out by looking for a smithy, not a tailoring shop. If one found a loom in the smithy rather than a forge, this latter tool would be intuitively recognized as being “out of place”, whereas the former would strike one as making sense given the context at hand. In MMOGs, how equipment is arranged is in part determined by the locations in which it is discovered.

Second, the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed often play a substantial role in orienting the collective activities of those participating in this kind of pragmatic shared environment. Here I will focus on three main facets of this orienting function, each of which often appear hand-in-hand.

First, these locations often orient collective activity by providing what traditional phenomenology would refer to as destinations “for the sake of which” other interrelated activities are performed. These destinations commonly concern those participating in MMOGs circumspectively, even if they are not explicitly grasped as the main purpose or goal of shared pragmatic activity. For example, in order to forge a new set of armor, a smith in World of Warcraft ultimately has to visit a smithy. This means traveling to a suitably large town or village rather than searching endlessly in the wilderness of Elwynn Forest. While the smithy itself may not be grasped as the explicit goal of the various activities which take place during the journey (locating the path to the docks to take the boat to travel to Ironforge, earning enough money to pay for passage, locating the smithy in the centre of town, etc.) it is nonetheless true that these activities are, in a sense, guided towards the destination that will ultimately allow what does overtly concern the smith to come to fruition: say, providing a friend with a new set of armor. In this instance, a particular kind of location helps orient activity by providing a meaningful destination within a particular pragmatic shared environment.

Furthermore, these locations often encourage and constrain, afford and do not afford, certain activities, while simultaneously leaving room for a good deal of improvisation. In other words, while the locations one comes across in a MMOG do not exactly determine what is done in them, they tend to both limit, and in limiting open up, a specific range of possibilities for purposeful activity. For example, no matter what one wants to do, it is just not possible to swim in the Ironforge bank (there is no water). However, one can visit the tellers and check to see what
kinds of good one has deposited. Moreover, while it is possible to enter the bank through the door, it is not possible to enter the bank through the walls or the ceiling. In these basic regards, while this particular location both enables and constrains certain activities, it does not itself determine whether or not one walks or crawls to the tellers, whether or not one goes directly to the tellers or follows the wall, whether or not one stops to chat with someone or goes hurriedly about one’s business. This location orients purposeful activity towards a specific range of opportunities and yet at the same time provides considerable scope within which participants in this world are “left to their own devices”.

Lastly, these locations also enable certain activities to come to presence as more or less coherent, more or less sensible, more or less expected, both to the one actually performing the act and to others within the immediate surroundings. These locations, in other words, do not just afford and not afford certain activities, they also play a significant role in enabling instances of action within the range possible to come to presence as, for example, surprising, unexpected, comedic, silly, routine, or noteworthy. For instance, while there is nothing in the environment itself which prevents one from breaking out in dance in the Ironforge bank, actually doing so is likely to draw attention in a way that it would not if the same activity was carried out in a different location – say, in the inn next door. The bank provides a specific context within which certain possible activities make sense, and within which others, while equally possible, are nonetheless likely to be taken to be askew or unusual in the given surroundings.

The third reason I have for interpreting the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed as places in the relevant sense is because such locations often broadly circumscribe the participant-participant interactions it is possible to have within such pragmatic shared environments. What I mean by this is that how one tends to be received by others in a MMOG, as well as how one tends to receive others, is often due in large part to the particular context within which an encounter happens. Where an avatar appears to be standing at a certain point in time, the direction an avatar appears to be travelling, how far one avatar seems to be from another, the site where avatars have come into contact, where an avatar originates from – all such locational phenomena (and many others besides) help structure how those participating in MMOGs are likely to react to, and interact with, one another. Location, in other words, often plays a significant role in determining how those within a particular vicinity come to presence for one each other: whether one is likely to be taken to be, and to take others to be, hostile or
friendly, helpful or disruptive, irrelevant or noteworthy, friendly or potential competition. Two examples should help to illustrate this point.

In EverQuest 2, in order to create an avatar one must select a “home city” where one’s activity in the world begins. The location where one chooses to be from in turn determines what is referred to as one’s “alignment”: those who choose to hail from the city of Qeynos, for example, are called “good”, while those who choose to come from the city of Freeport are referred to as “evil”. While I do not claim that these designations reflect a genuine ethical commitment to good or to evil on the part of those who are so designated (although they may), it is nonetheless true that the kinds of interaction it is possible for participants to have in this particular MMOG are in part circumscribed by their alignment and, therefore, by the location they are from. Those who are “good”, for example, cannot form groups with those who are “evil” because it is not possible to communicate directly with members of the opposing group. Those who are “evil” cannot visit the cities of those who are “good” without generally being taken to be hostile. Those who are “good” are prohibited from using the same facilities (auction houses, postal services, means of transportation, etc.) as those who are “evil” and so on. Here, regardless of whether or not one actively identifies with the tendencies possibly connotated by the name of the group, how one is received, and receives others, within the world in question is often oriented from the start by where one is from. Moreover, while it is possible to alter one’s alignment in EverQuest 2 – to become “good” while having started out as “evil”, for example – doing so actually involves betraying the city one originally selected, and gaining citizenship to one of the cities of the opposing order. Conducting such a betrayal reconfigures the landscape of possible interactions within the world quite profoundly: one loses access to any properties and goods owned in the original city, the territories within which one is likely to be taken to be hostile are reversed, the range of communications possible with former allies is severely delimited, etc. In this case, then, location of origin functions as one basic element which helps

\[143\] For details regarding citizenship and betrayal in EverQuest 2 see [http://eq2.wikia.com/wiki/Betrayal_Timeline](http://eq2.wikia.com/wiki/Betrayal_Timeline). It is worth emphasizing that the kind of territorial circumscription described in the example I discuss here is prevalent in many MMOGs, but typically without such overtly moralistic categorizations. In World of Warcraft, for example, selecting to be from one city or another determines whether or not one is part of the “Horde” or the “Alliance”. In Warhammer Online, one’s allegiance to particular territories determines whether or not one is part of “Empire” or “Destruction”. Interactions among Horde/Alliance and Empire/Destruction members are circumscribed in many similar ways to those described in this section.
to configure the kinds of participant-participant interactions it is possible to have within this particular pragmatic shared environment.

A second example of the phenomenon I have in mind here can be illustrated using *World of Warcraft*. In this MMOG, regions are broadly categorized in terms of whether they are “contested” or “uncontested”. In “contested” regions (for example, what are typically referred to as “battlegrounds”), the restrictions that typically prevent participants from engaging in combat with one another are eliminated or reduced, thus enabling members of this world’s opposing factions (Horde and Alliance) to more easily come into armed conflict with one another.144 Insofar as these contested regions are territories where confrontation is not only possible but likely to occur, hostility is the presumed basis for participant-participant interactions within these regions. Whatever one’s actual intentions, desires, or goals might be, the likelihood is that one will be taken by those of the opposing faction to be a threat, and by those of one’s own faction to be an ally, when encountering others in such an area. In other words, although these regions do not exactly determine how one will be received and will receive others, they nonetheless establish certain risks, obligations, and opportunities in virtue of being locations of a particular kind. Moreover, participants who find themselves in these regions are required to take account of these risks, obligations, and opportunities regardless of whether they would like to or not. For example, standing close to a member of the opposing faction in a neutral or uncontested city such as Gadgetzan is a relatively innocuous act. But doing so in a contested region such as Alterac Valley makes one very likely to be taken as a “target of opportunity”, regardless of whether or not one actively poses a threat. In contested territory, seeing someone move towards others of the same faction is likely to be regarded immediately as a request for help if those of the other faction can be seen “in pursuit” behind. But, in another context, seeing members from both groups moving together towards the same destination would not be taken to signify an impending conflict. Likewise, not helping others of the same faction in a contested region tends to be taken to be a kind of failure rather than a simple omission: a sign of cowardice, or of not having “done one’s duty” in response to a common threat. In other, relatively more peaceful contexts, such omissions are readily taken to be *de rigueur*. Once again, the point here is that the

144 Many different kinds of restriction prevent combat in uncontested regions. Some restrictions are programmed “into” the world by developers, some restrictions are a matter of convention, some are a combination of these, etc.
locations of which this MMOG appear to be composed broadly circumscribe the participant-participant interactions it is possible to have within this particular pragmatic shared environment.

III

In the preceding section, I have argued that there are three reasons for interpreting the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed as places in a sense that recalls Heidegger’s existential-ontological conception of Gegenden. In essence, this argument amounts to the idea that the heterogeneous, interconnected domains that participants discover while participating in a MMOG warrant being interpreted as shared, organizing, orienting, enabling, and constraining regions that tend to impose meaning on the everyday pragmatic activities of those participating in such worlds. Not only do MMOGs come to presence as worldly – their worldliness now appears to be a specifically locational kind of worldliness: one established in part by places which provide equipment and those making use of such equipment contexts for meaningful activity, and which broadly circumscribe the interactions possible among those encountering each other within these places.

In this section, I turn to the second objective of this chapter: namely, to show in what way the traditional phenomenological framework which has been provisionally followed thus far in Part 2 of this dissertation would have a difficult time explaining how it has become possible for those participating in MMOGs to encounter MMOGs as places in the sense just now established. After making a few preliminary methodological remarks, I will discuss why this difficulty in particular arises. Then, rather than attempting to resolve this difficulty, I am going to propose altering the phenomenological framework of this study in a way that I believe, first, will allow the actual dimensions and impact of this difficulty to be more thoroughly assessed; and, second, will allow us to make significant headway into understanding what this difficulty entails for the phenomenological analysis of MMOGs in particular, and for traditional phenomenology in general.

III.a – Spatiality and MMOGs

One noteworthy aspect of Heidegger’s existential-ontological conception of Gegenden is that it does not define the spatiality of places in terms of what would normally be referred to as their “physical characteristics” such as their position in space, the nature of their materiality, or their
extension. Nor does Heidegger’s existential-ontological concept of spatiality focus on the geometric properties of places – with mathematical considerations of points, lines, curves, and surfaces as these constitute particular regions encountered by Dasein.

On one hand, I believe that this over-arching approach towards understanding the spatiality of phenomena is a clear advantage when attempting to understand the nature of the places of which MMOGs appear to be composed. Broadly speaking, this approach provides a well-developed and theoretically rich perspective on a subject for which it is extremely difficult to even articulate meaningful questions. For example, how should one even go about attempting to assess the “physical characteristics” of a place such as Alterac Valley? Should one begin looking at the screen where the valley is rendered, or the hard-drive where the assets which are rendered are saved, or the processors where the valley is computed, or somewhere else? Does the difficulty of positioning Alterac Valley “in space” imply that it is non-physical? If it is non-physical how is it possible to actually see it? Is the geometry of the valley “merely” apparent? What about the geometry of the screen on which it is seen? How might these relate? How is what might be taken to be the apparent extension of the valley related to the extension of the technologies required to view it? Here, the underlying issue is not just that these sorts of question introduce some dense and complicated issues, but that it is difficult to be confident that such questions even frame the issues in a useful and perspicuous manner. Why these questions and not others? Why might we think that such questions even begin to make sense of what is going on with the places of which MMOGs appear to be composed? Nor is it obvious that it would be possible to answer such questions without inquiring first into what exactly is meant by materiality, extension, position, physical, at least within the relevant context of study. Although such a fundamental investigation is possible in theory, it would doubtless require considerable conceptual resources.145

Interpreting the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed as places in an existential-ontological sense, however, allows us to circumvent questions such as those outlined in the previous paragraph by allowing inquiry to focus initially on the orienting, organizing, and meaning-giving function of what tends to be experienced as places in a MMOG, rather than on,

145 Certainly resources greater than those afforded by this sort of dissertation.
for example, the possible physicality or non-physicality of such places. In other words, and to put it somewhat flat-footedly, such an approach allows us to focus initially on the impact such places have on human existence without requiring a well formulated articulation of what would possibly be taken to be the physical characteristics of these sorts of location. Concerns about materiality, extension, dimensionality can come later, and can be treated as higher order concerns, rather than impede progress right from the start.

Of course, this is not to say that conceiving of such locations as places in the relevant sense will not also encounter difficulties which will require considerable effort to even articulate adequately. The point, rather, is that taking such an approach makes it easier to have confidence, first, that any problems which do come to light are not arbitrary or random but are actually called for by a particular theoretical context (namely, the one that frames their understanding as places in an existential-ontological sense); and, second, that any such problems at least have the advantage of having access to a set of rich conceptual tools to aid in their formulation and subsequent investigation. With that being said, I now want to articulate one such difficulty with conceiving the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed as places in an existential-ontological sense.

III.b – Limits of The Traditional Notion of Dasein’s Spatiality

The phenomenological framework that has been provisionally followed in Part 2 of this dissertation posits a fundamental-ontological distinction between what Heidegger refers to as Dasein’s spatiality – consisting of the existentiales of de-severance [Ent-fernung] and directionality [Ausrichtung] – and the way in which beings other than Dasein (for example, the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand) are encountered as spatial within Dasein’s environment. This kind of ontological distinction – between Dasein, on one hand, and the non-Dasein it is possible for Dasein to experience on the basis of its own way of Being, on the other – is one of the most basic suppositions of the project of Being and Time as a whole, and receives (not coincidentally) especially clear indication in Heidegger’s analysis of the spatiality of Being-in-the-world. Thus, for example, Heidegger writes on p.138 of Being and Time that,

If we attribute spatiality to Dasein, then this ‘Being in space’ must manifestly be conceived in terms of the kind of Being which that entity possesses. Dasein is essentially not a Being-present-at-hand;
and its “spatiality” cannot signify anything like occurrence at a position in ‘world-space’, nor can it signify Being-ready-to-hand at some place. Both of these are kinds of Being which belong to entities encountered within-the-world. Dasein, however, is ‘in’ the world in the sense that it deals with entities within-the-world, and does so concernfully and with familiarity. So if spatiality belongs to it in any way, that is possible only because of this Being-in. But its spatiality shows the characteristics of de-severance and directionality.

For the purposes of this analysis of MMOGs, it is important to emphasize that the spatiality of Being-in-the-world and the Being-in-space of beings other than Dasein are not conceived by Heidegger to be merely different – they are held not to be on “ontological par” with one another. Heidegger maintains that the spatiality of Dasein is the existential-ontological condition for Dasein’s being able to encounter entities as spatial within a pragmatic shared environment. On p.145 of Being and Time, for example, while focusing on the spatiality of equipment, Heidegger writes that, “only because Dasein is spatial in the way of de-severance and directionality can what is ready-to-hand within-the-world be encountered in its spatiality”. Similarly, he writes two paragraphs later that,

When we let entities within-the-world be encountered in the way which is constitutive for Being-in-the-world, we ‘give them space’. This ‘giving space’ [Raum-geben], which we also call ‘making room’ [Einräumen] for then, consists in freeing the ready-to-hand for its spatiality’.

In essence, the claim that Heidegger is making is that what ultimately allows entities such as items of equipment to be discovered by Dasein in the typical sorts of spatial arrangements that Dasein experiences in everydayness – which is to say, as being things that Dasein takes to be, for example, too far away to use properly, just near enough to grasp, behind one another, up on a

146 Heidegger, Being and Time, 146.
147 Ibid.
shelf rather than down on the ground, beside each other, right there above us – is Dasein’s existential-ontological character as a being that creates spaces within which things can be encountered as opportunities for conducting shared pragmatic activity.

This way of making room for things, of permitting things to take up positions where they tend to be discovered in everydayness, is what Heidegger means to designate using the terms “de-severance” and “directionality”. For Heidegger, these two spatial concepts signify Dasein’s existential-ontological propensity to eliminate the remoteness of things by providing spaces in which they can be manipulated in meaningful ways; by arranging entities in arrays that are organized in terms of the equipmental context wherein they are located; and by setting things in place in order to facilitate the possible uses Dasein can make of them. For Heidegger, in other words, the remoteness, nearness, placement, and orientation of objects in an environment is discovered only on the basis of Dasein’s ontological character as a being that composes, divides, organizes and lays-out space. The Being-in-space of things (broadly speaking) is in this sense subsequent to, and dependant upon, the spatiality of Being-in-the-world. Whatever is encountered within-the-world is found in the places where it is experienced only because Dasein discloses a spatial context within which such things can be located. This is, as it were, the primary sense in which Dasein is a spatial Being: not some-thing which occupies space, but a way of Being that introduces the very possibility of there being an “around and about” [Um] which is constitutive of the environment [Um-welt] wherein entities are positioned.

The difficulty that I want to raise, however, is that this particular way of conceiving the spatiality of Dasein does not account for the way in which the places of which MMOGs appear to be composed, as well as the equipment discovered in these places, are intuitively received by those participating in a MMOG. Doing justice to the phenomena of place as it comes to presence in MMOGs puts pressure on the fundamental-ontological distinction between the Being of

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148 Although the following aspect of Heidegger’s thought does not bear special consequence for this dissertation, it is worth mentioning that Heidegger seems to conceive Dasein’s ability to make room for things as a largely privative activity. In the case of the term “Ent-fernung” (de-severance), by emphasizing the prefix “Ent” and the adjective “fern” (far, remote, distant, afar) Heidegger is suggesting that Dasein makes room for things by “removing remoteness” or “eliminating distance” – almost as if “the things themselves” had a tendency to, as it were, resist being encountered by Dasein and remain unavailable.
Dasein and the Being of entities non-Dasein, and the idea that Dasein alone creates spaces within which things can be encountered. Let me explain.

What Heidegger means in referring to de-severance and directionality as *existentiales* is that these are completely unique and essential structures only of Being-in-the-world. It is, for Heidegger, a kind of category error to think of entities other than Dasein as de-severant and directional. Rather, it is the de-severance and directionality of Dasein only, of Dasein’s unique ontological character as a being that discloses a meaningful spatial context for the entities located within its environment, which allows entities other than Dasein to come to presence as “having been placed” within the regions where they discovered. Observation of MMOGs, however, suggests that the spatiality of the places of which these particular pragmatic shared environments appear composed, as well as that of the equipment typically put to use in such places, is a function of Dasein and of what are normally referred to as avatars – which is to say, is a function of Dasein and of what a traditional phenomenological perspective would regard “simply” as a type of being disclosed within Dasein’s environment. The following three illustrations will help to both explain and substantiate this claim.

As was discussed on p.124, Heidegger’s analysis of the spatiality of Dasein aims to explain how it is possible for Dasein to deal in pragmatic ways with the objects located in meaningful spatial arrangements within its environment. But what exactly is it that allows equipment discovered in a place such as Alterac Valley – say, a lever that opens a gate which allows entry to a fortress – to be regarded by someone participating in a MMOG as, for example, near enough to use or too far away to activate? On one hand, of course, there are the shared pragmatic goals and circumspective concerns of Dasein which make it possible to encounter the lever as an item of equipment at all. *In the case of this particular pragmatic shared environment, however, this is crucially not enough:* the particular placement and abilities of what, for the time being, I will refer to as “Dasein’s avatar” also contributes to determining the spatiality of the location in which this equipment is disclosed. The lever in question is near enough for Dasein if it is near enough for Dasein’s avatar. It is too far away for Dasein if it is too far away for Dasein’s avatar. More generally speaking, what counts as “around and about” Dasein in this particular case is also and at once that which is “around and about” Dasein’s avatar. The vicinity within which things are encountered is constituted both by Dasein and by a contribution made by this particular kind of entity. *Where* an item of equipment is discovered is a function of the uses
Dasein can make of it, and of what Dasein’s avatar makes possible as kinds of pragmatic engagement. The placement, organization, and orientation of things in a MMOG, in other words, depends in part upon Dasein and in part upon Dasein’s avatar.

As a second illustration, consider what allows a particular location in Alterac Valley – say, the fortress of Dun Baldar – to be experienced by Dasein as close by or far away. Again, on one hand, there are the circumspective concerns that orient Dasein’s activity within this particular kind of pragmatic shared environment. But, once again, the position and abilities of Dasein’s avatar also contribute to the spatiality of this particular location. Dun Baldur is close by for Dasein if Dasein’s avatar is at Stormpike Aid Station, but the same location is far away for Dasein if its avatar is beside Frostwolf Graveyard. If the avatar in question is capable of moving rapidly (say, by making use of equipment disclosed in its vicinity), the distance in question may be apprehended differently by Dasein. Moreover, what is close by for one Dasein may be far away for another, not only because each individual Dasein may have different projects and concerns, but because their avatars may have different capabilities while nonetheless being placed at roughly the same location. The nature of the “whereabouts” that concerns Dasein as a destination is in this case partially constituted by the activities and intentions of Dasein, and partially by what its avatar makes possible for Dasein within this particular pragmatic shared environment.

For a third illustration, consider the spatial aspect of what it takes for an entity such as a Frostwolf or a Stormpike Owl to be regarded as a danger or a threat for someone participating in a MMOG. The potential such entities have to instill fear, cause harm, or create loss in part depends upon such entities being located in a situation that involves the possible disruption or interruption of Dasein’s projects and circumspective concerns. But whether or not such entities are so located in part depends upon the nature of the whereabouts established by Dasein’s avatar. How such entities are oriented in relation to the horizon within which Dasein’s avatar acts is in part constitutive of how such entities are themselves encountered. If a Frostwolf is very far from Dasein’s avatar it might not be apprehended as a threat at all; but if the wolf then turns towards the avatar in question and begins to approach, the way in which it comes to presence for Dasein will perhaps in turn change; and it is only once the wolf is near or besides the avatar that Dasein is made susceptible to the danger this entity presents. What lets this entity be encountered in the way in which it commonly is – what “makes room” for it to be apprehended as something of
such-and-such a kind (e.g. a danger, a threat) – is both Dasein and the avatar with which Dasein discloses this particular sort of pragmatic shared environment.

In my view, then, an adequate phenomenological analysis of MMOGs needs to take account of the contribution avatars make to how that which Dasein encounters while participating in these pragmatic shared environments is disclosed in everydayness. In these encounters, what is near for Dasein cannot be so without the nearness established by the proximity of an avatar; what Dasein apprehends as above or beside or behind or below cannot obtain this spatial character without the vicinity “around and about” an avatar. Dasein’s avatar is what in part allows Dasein to bring things close within a MMOG, to abolish remoteness and encounter things, for example, as equipment which can be put to use here but not there, or which requires moving over there in order to be put to use. Dasein’s avatar helps to structure the meaning around which these particular arrays of equipment and the regions in which they are located are organized.

The difficulty, however, is that the phenomenological framework I have been provisionally following is not equipped to satisfy this imperative, and account for the avatar’s contribution to the spatiality of Dasein. By positing a fundamental-ontological distinction between Dasein and the entities Dasein discloses within-the-world, the “ontological burden” of disclosure itself is held to lie entirely on the side of Dasein. According to this framework, de-severance and directionality are what ultimately make it possible for Dasein to encounter things as Being-in-space; but none of the beings thus discovered are held to assist Dasein in the opening up or the making room for the spaces in which such beings are discovered. This, however, is at odds with the phenomena of place as it comes to light with respect to MMOGs.

To express the same issue in somewhat different terms, while traditional phenomenology would resist the idea that de-severance and directionality can be constituted by beings that are non-Dasein and which are disclosed spatially within-the-world, it is difficult to see how what is encountered as distance, orientation, proximity (thereby, what comes to presence as remote, too far away, just near enough, etc.) while Dasein participates in a MMOG can be understood in spatial terms without taking the involvement of avatars into account at the level of disclosure itself. In the case of MMOGs, what we seem to come into contact with are a class of beings – namely, avatars – which, one the one hand, are themselves discovered by Dasein – i.e. which
Dasein can locate, position, move (not to mention dress, re-size, delete, etc.) – but which, on the other hand, also play a role in allowing the spatiality of a certain kind of pragmatic shared environment to manifest as it actually does for Dasein’s everyday concerns.

The traditional phenomenological sense in which avatars would be interpreted as entities within-the-world does not exhaust the nature of their Being. Such entities are not just found in places where they can be manipulated in meaningful ways, they also allow Dasein to make room for things such that they can be placed for Dasein. Such entities are not just arranged in meaningful arrays organized in terms of an equipmental context, they also allow for there to be locations in which certain equipment is put in place. This functionality, which needs to be accounted for if interpretation is to meet the actual needs of the phenomena arising in this field of study, is at odds with the way of thinking proposed by the kind of phenomenology which has so far guided the interpretation.

In the following section, then, I will propose a way of thinking about Dasein and avatars that is explicitly intended to make sense of how it has become possible for Dasein to encounter the locations of which MMOGs appear composed as places in the sense of shared, organizing, orienting, enabling, constraining regions in which arrays of equipment are located. The way of thinking that I will propose involves doing some constructive work on the phenomenological framework I have been provisionally following in Part 2 of this dissertation. In particular, this proposal involves suspending the idea that there is necessarily a fundamental-ontological distinction between Dasein and entities other than Dasein. Although the proposal that I will make is ultimately going to have to deal with a great deal of texture, I will initially focus on explaining what the proposal itself means, what it amounts to for the study of MMOGs, and how it bears on traditional phenomenology.

IV

My proposal to account for the way in which Dasein and avatars function together to enable Dasein to encounter the places of which MMOGs appear to be composed is to introduce the concept of **conjuncture**. Conjuncture is a concept that designates an interaction between Dasein and avatars that occurs at an existential-ontological level. It refers to the co-constitutive act whereby Dasein and avatars **conjoin** in order to disclose a horizon of meaningful assignments or
references [Verweisungen] within which beings can be encountered as situated or placed in the ways in which they tend to be in Dasein’s everyday participations in a MMOG.

This concept is intended, first and foremost, to communicate the idea of an existential intimacy between Dasein and avatars – an intimacy which, despite its inherent closeness, does not quite become a union in the sense of a singularity that comes to be when, for example, two different beings become a single unit. In this regard, the concept of conjuncture – the conjoining of Dasein and avatars – indicates both a process of melding and the maintenance of a separation. Conjuncture is “more than” a relationship if a relationship is taken to be “just” an occasional association or connection between two or more otherwise independent things. And yet conjuncture is also “other than” a subsumption in which one thing comes to contain or take up or include something else as part of itself. To argue, as I have done, that MMOGs world means that “there is” Dasein for which MMOGs come to presence as worldly. Conjuncture is an expression of the idea that only avatars and Dasein together – where this togetherness is conceived at an existential-ontological level – allow for there to be the kind of “there” that MMOGs appear to Dasein to be.

Although attempting to describe conjuncture in terms which isolate the “role” of Dasein and the “role” of avatars is somewhat inimical to the concept itself, because this concept designates an existential intimacy which does not involve the integration of one into the other, it is nonetheless feasible to isolate each aspect of that which conjoins for rhetorical purposes of explication. Thinking of avatars in terms of conjuncture means thinking of avatars as inner-worldly beings or beings within-a-world, in a traditional phenomenological sense, and as world-disclosing, in the sense of contributing to how a particular horizon of meaning comes to provide a structured, shared, pragmatic context within which what is experienced by the human way of Being emerges. Conjuncture thus means thinking of avatars as at once disclosed and disclosing; de-severed and de-severing; directed and directional; revealed and revealing. Correspondingly, thinking of Dasein in terms of conjuncture means thinking of Dasein as a way of Being whose essential ability to disclose world can be influenced at an existential-ontological level by something which Dasein itself discloses within an environment. In other words, conjuncture means thinking of Dasein as at once disclosing and disclosed; de-severing and de-severed; directional and directed; revealing and revealed.
Strictly speaking, the concept of conjuncture makes the way of speaking about Dasein and avatars that was adopted for the purposes of initial analysis somewhat inadequate. Speaking of an avatar as if it were Dasein’s avatar (as I did, for example, in the preceding section) attributes a level of possessionality orthogonal to the togetherness I am proposing here. Taking an avatar to be something that Dasein has, or taking an avatar to be something which is of Dasein, which the possessive case in English would conventionally be taken to warrant, does not sufficiently attend to the possible alteration that happens when Dasein comes to be Dasein in part by way of something else that together with Dasein discloses meaning.

Although the concept of conjuncture is meant to first and foremost account for how Dasein experiences the particular kind of pragmatic shared environments MMOGs appear to be, it should not be assumed that the togetherness of conjuncture simply ends when Dasein is no longer participating in such a world. Whether or not the influence an avatar has on Dasein’s ability to disclose meaning carries on beyond the apparent boundaries of a MMOG is at this point an open question. There is, it is worth mentioning, nothing inherently contradictory about the idea that once Dasein has conjoined with an avatar it may not be able to easily put such existential intimacy aside.

IV.a – Conjuncture and Traditional Conceptions of Avatars

It should be apparent that the way of conceiving Dasein and avatars proposed in this chapter is far removed from conceptions of avatars common in existing studies of MMOGs. For one, conjuncture does not involve regarding avatars as representations of any kind. It does not conceive of avatars as visual images of something, as likenesses of something, as things that stand-in for or act as surrogates, or as representatives of or for something else. In this regard, my proposal simply does not intersect with accounts of avatars which foreground some notion of representation.

My proposal is also quite different than thinking about (what would typically be referred to as) an or the or one’s avatar as something that a player or a user or an operator (or even Dasein) uses or controls while participating in a MMOG. In phenomenological terms, this is because my proposal is quite different than taking avatars to be tools or items of equipment in the phenomenological sense of the ready-to-hand. As traditionally defined, whatever is Zuhandenheit cannot be other than disclosed within-a-world by Dasein. According to my
interpretation of the spatiality of MMOGs, however, thinking of avatars as “just” tools or items of equipment does not account for the contribution that avatars make to actually disclosing a horizon of meaningful assignments or references within which certain sorts of inner-worldly being can be encountered.

My proposal is also quite different than thinking of an or the or one’s avatar as something that has a certain kind of appearance, say, insofar as it is an object rendered on an LCD or cathode-ray screen. In this case, the underlying difference is that my proposal does not exhaustively treat what would normally be conceived as an or the or one’s avatar as some kind of thing at all. On one hand, the concept of conjuncture does indeed indicate that avatars are entities – and therefore have certain features or appearances – in the basic phenomenological sense of being within-a-world. But, on the other hand, the concept of conjuncture also and equally indicates that the “within-worldness” of avatars does not entirely constitute what they are: for, as I have already said, conjuncture also signifies how avatars function with Dasein at an existential-ontological level to together disclose world.

This is why my proposal is also quite different than thinking of an or the or one’s avatar as something that grants human beings access to, or provides them with, a certain kind of presence within a MMOG. The concept of conjuncture is meant to communicate the idea that “there is” the specific kind of “there” [Da] within which entities can obtain the kind of presence they commonly have in a MMOG because of a more basic existential-ontological connection between Dasein and avatars. The presence that entities such as avatars, for example, may themselves have or afford someone is here held to be subsequent to and dependant upon the contribution avatars make to disclosing world. Stated in somewhat different terms, my proposal is that it is only because there is a particular kind of co-constitutive world-disclosing happening by way of the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars that there is for Dasein the kind of space within which things commonly encountered while participating in a MMOG, including avatars, can obtain they presence they may have.
The proximity of my concept of conjuncture to corporeal conceptions of avatars is less straightforward than the cases discussed previously. Here, everything depends upon what exactly the corporeality of avatars and the corporeality of human beings are taken to be. Because this topic extends beyond the scope of this dissertation, I will confine myself here only to the following preliminary (but hopefully guiding) remarks.

*Being and Time* once again provides a useful point of contact. When discussing the nature of Dasein’s Being-in-the-world Heidegger remarks that “one cannot think of it as the Being-present-at-hand of some corporeal thing (such as a human body) ‘in’ an entity which is present at hand”. As should be clear, much the same could be said of any attempt to understand the possible corporeality of avatars in terms which would satisfy the concept of conjuncture proposed here. Interpreting an avatar as “some corporeal thing” present-at-hand would, at best, account only for the way in which avatars are disclosed as inner-worldly beings – and even then, only if it were actually accurate to claim that the Being of this particular kind of phenomenon is that of presence-at-hand. At least insofar as presence-at-hand is traditionally conceived, interpreting the possible corporeality of avatars in such terms does not account for the contribution I have maintained that avatars make to actually disclosing world. In other words, because conjuncture requires thinking of avatars as at once disclosed and disclosing; de-severed and de-severing; directed and directional; revealed and revealing, understanding their possible corporeality in terms of presence-at-hand only satisfies the first-half of each of these requirements (and, even then, in a way that does not intuitively correspond with how avatars are actually received in everyday experience).

What makes the case of corporeality more difficult to assess, however, is that understanding corporeality in terms of presence-at-hand is not the only way of interpreting the nature of bodily human existence. Although I will not describe the following case in point with the detail it ultimately deserves, one such conception of corporeality which also provides a useful

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149 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 79.

150 If one was to attempt to understand the corporeality of avatars in Heideggerian terms that apply to inner-worldly beings alone, one would surely begin with the notion of readiness-to-hand rather than that of presence-at-hand. My concept of conjuncture, however, starts with neither.
analog for understanding avatars in corporeal terms that satisfy the requirements of conjuncture is provided by Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception*.

One of the basic ideas that governs Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of human existence is that the human body itself is not adequately conceived as an object of the world, or as something that has a determinate position in space (i.e. as what Heidegger would refer to as present-at-hand). For Merleau-Ponty, rather, the human body ought to be interpreted as “our means of communication with [the world]” or as “our general medium for having a world”.¹⁵¹ Insofar as Merleau-Ponty himself understands world as a horizon of meaning within which objects are encountered as significant and spatial, referring to the body as a medium or a means of communication is intended to call attention to his claim that the human body itself plays a role in imposing meaning on the world of everyday human concerns – or, to express the same point in Heideggerian terms, that the human body itself plays a role in how world is disclosed for a being whose way of Being is Being-in-the-world. For Merleau-Ponty, the human body in part allows for there to be situations for human beings within which objects and others can be encountered in the significant arrays in which they are in everyday experience. The body is what in part allows there to be world understood as a meaningful context of typically pragmatic human conduct.

For the purposes of this discussion of conjuncture, moreover, what is especially noteworthy about Merleau-Ponty’s notion of corporeality is not just that it avoids interpreting bodily human existence in terms of presence-at-hand; and not just that it assigns the body a role in actually constituting the meaning of worldly human existence; but that he also entertains the possibility of entering into “relationships” with objects that in turn transform the boundaries and meaning-giving function he assigns to the human body itself. Such alterations are most apparent in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of habit. Broadly speaking, for Merleau-Ponty, the habitual use of (presumably, some) objects lends itself to what he refers to as “the rearrangement and renewal of the corporeal schema”.¹⁵² What he means by this is that such habitual use is capable of altering the way in which the body actually contributes to disclosing meaningful situations for the human way of Being. Habit “expresses our power of dilating our Being-in-the-world, or changing our


existence by appropriating fresh instruments” – it means being able to appropriate things in such a way that actually changes how the world itself is revealed as a meaningful context for certain types of bodily activity. Habit, according to Merleau-Ponty, involves not just using things in certain familiar ways, but incorporating them into the body understood as the medium through which world itself is disclosed.

Although Merleau-Ponty considers several cases to support his interpretation of habit, the case involving someone who is visually impaired stands out as especially illustrative for the purposes of this discussion. On p.165 of *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes,

> The blind man’s stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight. In the exploration of things, the length of the stick does not enter expressly as a middle term: the blind man is rather aware of it through the position of objects than of the position of objects through it. The position of things is immediately given through the extent of the reach which carries him to it, which comprises besides the arm’s own reach the stick’s range of action.

I suspect that there is something analogous with the way in which Merleau-Ponty understands the kind of “corporeal adjunct” described in the preceding quote, and the way in which I have conceived the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars. Although I would not assent to the idea that an avatar “ceases to be an object” (ibid) for the one for whom it in part discloses world; and while I would resist the idea that incorporating an avatar as a means of altering one’s manner of world-disclosure is (necessarily) a response to some kind of impairment, my feeling is that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of habit expresses the same kind of existential intimacy I have in mind when referring to the contribution avatars make to the way in which Dasein discloses world. When thought as something at once disclosed and disclosing, de-severed and de-severing,
directed and directional, revealed and revealing, it makes sense to think of avatars as “an area of sensitivity” that extends the scope of Dasein’s meaningful activities – and which, precisely in extending these horizons, rearranges the “corporeal schema” of everyday Being-in-the-world. In this regard, although my conception of conjuncture is not itself a corporeal conception, it likely bears substantial affinities with interpretations of human existence – such as that of Merleau-Ponty – which prioritize the role that the body plays in determining the meaning of human conduct.

With that being said, however, apparently unlike Merleau-Ponty’s account of the body as the medium through which world is disclosed, my concept of conjuncture proposes that avatars both contribute to world-disclosure and that they are themselves encountered as inner-worldly beings through this manner of world-disclosure. When Dasein and avatars conjoin, in other words, avatars are not just part of the medium of disclosure, they are also beings that, through this very medium, are discovered within a world. When thought in terms of conjuncture, avatars belong not just on the side of disclosure, but also on the side of that which this kind of co-constitutive disclosure discloses. They are both a means of communicating with a certain kind of world, and one of the things that these worlds communicate.

Although I will not pursue these likely affinities and differences further in this dissertation, it should be said that, along the same lines, my proposal for interpreting Dasein and avatars in terms of conjuncture introduces a host of other questions which we are not yet in position to answer. For example, what might conjuncture lead us to think about claims (discussed on p.69) regarding the allegedly meritorious nature of MMOGs in general? How does conjuncture relate and not relate to the often repeated claim that avatars provide people with opportunities for basically unbounded or limitless self-expression? Does conjuncture help us to make sense of how, for example, words such as “I” and “we” and “they” are commonly used while participating in a MMOG?

Although I will return to some of these issues in the chapters which follow, it is necessary to first discuss how the preliminary interpretation of MMOGs advanced thus far in Part 2 of this dissertation needs to be amended in order to more thoroughly account for the phenomena which commonly appear while participating in a MMOG. So far, this interpretation has focused on the ontological continuity of MMOGs and on the way in which Dasein and avatars work together to
disclose meaning. As will become clear in chapter 8, however, it is also necessary to account for the substantial ontological differences which characterize the worldliness of these particular pragmatic shared environments.
8 Fallenness, Thrownness, and MMOGs

In the previous chapter, I argued that there are three reasons for interpreting the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed as places in a sense which recalls Heidegger’s notion of Gegenden. I also claimed that the traditional phenomenological framework which has been provisionally followed in Part 2 would have a hard time explaining how it has become possible for Dasein to experience the phenomena of place as it comes to presence in MMOGs. I then proposed the concept of conjuncture to account for the co-constitutive role Dasein and avatars play in disclosing a horizon of meaningful assignments or references within which beings in a MMOG can be encountered as situated in the ways in which they tend to be during Dasein’s participations.

In this chapter, I extend my interpretation of MMOGs by focusing on two characteristics of everyday Being-in-the-world: fallenness and thrownness. Focusing on these two phenomena serves two related objectives. First, it re-confirms that MMOGs are ontologically continuous with Being-in-the-world. Second, it also demonstrates that ontological continuity alone does not account for the existential-ontological constitution of MMOGs, and that there is a measure of ontological difference which must still be accounted for in the interpretation of these places. In this regard, this chapter also provides grounds for a suggestion that I make subsequently: namely, that establishing a concept capable of perspicuously dealing with the ontological continuities and ontological differences of MMOGs would facilitate a more thorough understanding of these sorts of pragmatic shared environment. In chapter 9, I propose a concept of virtuality which I think satisfies this goal (as well as others).

According to the phenomenological tradition I have been provisionally following, the world around and about Dasein is a world into which Dasein is thrown [geworfen], and wherein Dasein for the most part is fallen [verfallen]. Insofar as MMOGs have themselves been interpreted in this dissertation as worlds in an existential-ontological sense, it makes sense to wonder how, to

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154 Note that I am not using the phrase “ontological difference” in the traditional phenomenological sense to refer to the difference between Being and beings. For my use of the phrase, see especially p.157, 162, 166.
what extent, and to what ends fallenness and thrownness contribute to the worldliness of this particular kind of pragmatic shared environment; just as it makes sense to wonder how, to what extent, and to what ends, these sorts of world may or may not contribute to the fallenness and thrownness of human existence. In order to deal with issues such as these, it is useful to first recall the traditional phenomenological conceptions of fallenness and thrownness. Once again, it is important to note that the following discussion of these terms is not intended to provide a thorough account of them, but only to introduce them in a way that will facilitate analysis of MMOGs.

I.a – Fallenness

At its most basic level, Heidegger’s concept of _fallenness_ refers to the idea that in its average, everyday existence Dasein tends to deal with itself, with other Dasein, and with tools and other beings in terms of possibilities that are by and large defined by an indeterminate, unspecifiable plurality referred to as “das Man”. Being fallen means that Dasein is not only subject to the decisions, interpretations, projects, dispositions, tastes, attitudes, whims, etc. of these indeterminate others, but that Dasein is for the most indistinguishable from these others as it goes about dealing with the world of its everyday concerns. Insofar as Dasein is fallen, holds Heidegger, Dasein has a propensity to think and act in ways that make it out to be largely akin to others with the same way of Being. In terms of the equipment that Dasein uses, in terms of how it puts such equipment to use, in terms of the projects that Dasein aims to complete, and in terms of the conversations that Dasein has as it carries out its everyday tasks, fallenness indicates that Dasein continually deals with existence in ways that do not set it apart from “das Man”, but which rather serve primarily to ensconce kinds of agency amenable to the demands of an unspecifiable public. In fallenness,

[...] every other is like the next. This Being-with-one-another dissolves one’s own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of ‘the others’, in such a way, indeed, that the others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the “they” [das Man] is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as _they_ take pleasure; we read, seem and judge about
literature and art as they see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as they shrink back; we find ‘shocking’ what they find shocking. The “they”, which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness.  

According to Heidegger, moreover, fallenness is not something that has happened to Dasein, but is rather one of the basic states in which Dasein exists insofar as it is at all. Dasein, in other words, is continually falling into the everyday world of “das Man”, and cannot, as it were, “escape” falling, or put it behind itself as some kind of “event” with which it has come to terms. Dasein is always under pressure from the others from which it for the most part fails to distinguish itself. Nor does the falling of Dasein signify a descent from some kind of higher state into a lower condition. Nor does the falling of Dasein signify some lower condition which is bound to be transcended at some point in the future. For Heidegger, rather, existence itself is derelict or in decline [Verfallen] insofar as it is governed chiefly by “das Man”, and not as a result of having become inferior to something which came before, or in comparison to something ascendant which will follow.

According to Heidegger, moreover, insofar as Dasein is fallen, its everyday activities tend to be oriented by what he refers to as idle talk [Gerede], curiosity [Neugir], and ambiguity [Zweideutigkeit]. While characteristics of each of these aspects of fallenness overlap one another, with respect to idle talk, the basic idea is that Dasein’s everyday communications tend to create merely adequate or even superficial comprehension of whatever subjects happen to be under discussion – an intelligibility that is capable of satisfying the common goals, needs, and desires of public discourse, but which does not obtain any additional thoroughness or completeness, and which is untroubled by any such omission. What is said in idle talk has the character of gossip or chit-chat, is easily and widely disseminated, and tends to gather a kind of authority simply in virtue of having been said. It is not necessarily erroneous, nor is it overtly misleading, but it is, as Heidegger says, discourse that is basically “groundless” in the sense that it by and large keeps within the domain of topics, concepts, and means of investigation already

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155 Heidegger, Being and Time, 164.
established by “das Man”. What is said in idle talk has the character of Horatio’s response to Marcellus beneath the castle at Elsinore: “So have I heard and do in part believe it”.

Insofar as it is guided by curiosity, Heidegger’s central claim is that Dasein’s everyday dealings with the world tend to be rather aimless and free-floating, and are prone to be satisfied with understanding things not for the purposes of gaining genuine insight, but just for the sake of being able to claim that something has been understood (albeit in a rough and ready way). Oriented by a kind of restless inquisitiveness, Dasein is, according to Heidegger, easily distracted by what is novel, unusual, or unexpected – and whatever is novel, unusual, or unexpected is taken to have some kind of intrinsic merit simply in virtue of having piqued Dasein’s curiosity. Curiosity takes nothing to be off-limits to Dasein’s immediate comprehension. It makes Dasein prone to be fascinated by even that in which Dasein has no substantial interest, and it directs Dasein’s concernful dealings towards whatever just happens to stand out in the world around and about.

While it is treated as a third characteristic of fallenness, ambiguity is, to a considerable extent, also held to be the consequence of an everyday existence guided chiefly by idle talk and curiosity. Where chit-chat, the public way of interpreting things, and novelty reign, “everything looks as if it were genuinely understood, genuinely taken hold of, genuinely spoken, though at bottom it is not; or else it does not look so, and yet at bottom it is”. For Heidegger, ambiguity does not signify the possibility of things simply being open to more than one interpretation, it rather signifies that, at base, it is often public taste and “the common interest” which factors primarily in determining the accuracy and value of competing interpretations. In essence, ambiguity disrupts Dasein’s ability to determine for itself what has been disclosed in a significant and comprehensive way from that which has been only marginally or even superficially discussed in the course of daily existence. Whatever might be surmised about something might be taken to be as good as some other position; or it might not – depending on what “das Man” has collectively and indiscernibly judged to be the case.

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For reasons that will become apparent in chapter 10, it is also important to emphasize that fallenness is held to be at the heart of what Heidegger refers to as Dasein’s inauthenticity [uneigentlichkeit].\footnote{Although I focus initially on Dasein’s inauthenticity, I also discuss authenticity on p.177ff.} Here, it is useful to begin by noting that “eigen” – the root of both German terms typically translated respectively as “inauthentic” [uneigentlich] and “authentic” [eigentlich] – can mean “own” in the sense of owning or possessing as well as “proper” in the sense of belonging distinctively to some person, group, or thing. At this basic etymological level, being inauthentic [un-eigentlich] can be taken to mean simply lacking a certain kind of ownership or belonging, just as being authentic can be taken to mean possessing something distinctive or taking ownership of something in a singular way.

Given this basic reading of the root term, what exactly is it that Dasein is said to fail to take ownership of, or lack, in everyday fallenness? According to Heidegger, the answer is nothing less than Dasein its-self. Dasein’s inauthenticity, in other words, is meant to indicate that what Dasein lacks in everyday fallenness is a distinctive, singular way of existing that Dasein has made its own, and which would allow Dasein to discover, understand, interpret, and engage the world in terms that Dasein has set for itself, taken ownership of, and come to possess in a distinctive way as something appropriate to itself. Rather than “a self which has been taken hold of in its own way [eigens ergriffenen]”, in having its everyday existence guided chiefly by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity, “the self of everyday Dasein is the they-self” – a being whose possibilities of Being are determined by and large by “das Man”, and which lacks an authentic way of dealing with itself, others, and the public environment.\footnote{Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 167.} As an inauthentic being, the way in which Dasein exists in everydayness is accounted for chiefly in terms fixed by the indeterminate plurality from which Dasein for the most does not stand apart. In fallenness, Heidegger writes, “it is not ‘I’, in the sense of my own self, that ‘am’, but rather the others, whose way is that of the ‘they’. In terms of the “they” and as the “they”, I am given proximally to ‘myself’. Proximally Dasein is “they”, and for the most part it remains so”.\footnote{Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 167.}
I.b – Thrownness

With respect to the second existentialia to be discussed in this chapter, according to Heidegger, the basic feature of Dasein’s *thrownness* is that it is not possible for Dasein to choose that it exists in a world that matters to it, and that affects its concerns (and is in turn affected by its concerns) in ways, and because of factors, over which Dasein has less than complete control. In this regard, it is not only that the particular possibilities available to Dasein in the course of existence are in part configured by, for example, a family history, a sex, inclinations, cogitations, and languages that Dasein does not uniquely determine for itself (but which it can, at least in some cases, restrain, resist, modify, emphasize, completely embrace, etc.). For Heidegger, the very fact of having possibilities *per se* is not in the first instance something that Dasein has decided in favor of. Dasein exists, and it has to deal with that, even if it does so by subsequently negating its own existence. Dasein, as Heidegger writes, “is something that has been thrown; it has been brought into its “there” but *not* of its own accord. […] As existent, it never comes back behind its thrownness in such a way that it might first release this ‘that-it-is-and-has-to-be’ from its Being-its-self and lead it into the “there”.”

For Heidegger, then, the particular situations in which Dasein conducts itself in everydayness are broadly defined in terms of what he considers to be a kind of two-sided nullity – a “not which is constitutive of the Being of Dasein”.163 With respect to the first aspect of this nullity, for example, the exact character of the possibilities open to Dasein are not something that Dasein can set for itself. Whether Dasein, say, has been born in the 20th Century, comes from a family that natively speaks Croatian, is born with four fingers on its left hand, and is supposed to inherit the economic wealth of that family, are not within Dasein’s power to decide. Nor, with respect to the second aspect of this nullity, is Dasein able to do away with all such conditions and establish for itself the basic grounds of its Being-in-the-world. As thrown, Dasein has to deal with the situations in which it finds itself, and has to deal with these situations by exerting itself in ways that are available at the time. Whatever possibilities Dasein allows to pass by, those which it seizes upon and realizes, how Dasein engages the particular moments in which it is – all

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such activity is, for Heidegger, predicated upon being thrown into a world that is never unlimited and never self-selected by and for human existence.

Once again, for reasons that will become apparent in chapter 10, it is important to emphasize that thrownness also plays a central role in Heidegger’s analysis of inauthenticity. According to Heidegger, because Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, is always familiar with its worldliness—mindful, prior to explicit deliberation, of its nature as a being that exists—Dasein is at least to some extent aware that it is thrown into the world. Because of the two-fold nullity at the heart of thrownness, moreover, Heidegger holds that Dasein is prone to experience this particular aspect of its Being as a kind of lack or defect. In basic terms, this lack or defect can be understood as an often unarticulated but persistent recognition that Dasein will, in the course of everyday existence, inevitably be held accountable to an existence that is not entirely within its own power to shape. Being thrown, as it were, “gnaws” at Dasein because it is a nullity from which Dasein (insofar as it is Being-in-the-world) can never truly escape.

For Heidegger, “das Man” offers a kind of solace or consolation from one of the basic predicaments of existence itself. In inauthenticity, thrownness is—if not quite obscured or hidden entirely—distanced from Dasein insofar as it becomes an aspect of Dasein’s being that is taken over by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity. That no one chooses to be born is taken to be a fact that everyone knows but which, precisely for this reason, is not really worth mentioning—and is even a little embarrassing to admit. Curiosity distracts Dasein from thinking too directly or too hard about the exact dimensions and impact of its own existence. Ambiguity makes the facts that everyone is said to know uncertain: perhaps a human being can entirely shape its world as it sees fit, become anything it wants, achieve all the goals that it sets for itself as long as it does not give up and follows its dreams. Or perhaps not. In fostering a self directed first and foremost by the needs, aims, projects, and conversations of an indiscernible public, “das Man” makes thrownness out to be a minor issue that “everyone” has to deal with, but which should really arrest no one in particular.
II – Fallenness and MMOGs

Keeping in mind the phenomenological concepts outlined in the previous section, I now want to consider specifically: how, to what extent, and to what ends does fallenness contribute to the worldliness of MMOGs?

With respect to this question, observation suggests first that conjuncture facilitates traditional modes of fallen existence. Both the publicness [Öffentlichkeit] of an everyday world in which one is continually subjected to the decisions, ideas, projects, moods, tastes, attitudes, and desires of an indeterminate plurality from which one tends not to be distinguished; as well as conversations guided first and foremost by idle talk are readily apparent in MMOGs. I will discuss each of these in turn.

II.a – Traditional Modes of Fallenness

Participating in a MMOG often involves taking part in group activities that tend to be insensitive to the particularities of, and differences among, those participating. These activities tend to assume a general level of intelligibility or know-how aimed at facilitating the conduct of “everyone and yet no one in particular”, and often, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly, limit an individual’s possibilities in order to better orient the activity of the group as a whole. In *World of Warcraft*, for example, waiting for the Deeprun Tram is something that each participant tends to do in roughly the same sort of way – standing at the station silently and boredly, looking for distractions to pass the time, making the sorts of casual observation open to anyone else in the same region, engaging in “small talk” with those about. In addition to this, it is an activity for which it is difficult to even imagine doing and yet standing apart from others. Here, it is as if everyone silently obeys a dictum emanating from nowhere but permeating the area as a whole not to do or to encourage anything to come to the fore as exceptional or noteworthy. Everyone just waits, and waits in a way that tends to even things out. Nothing more is wanted or expected. In utilizing this public means of transit “every other is like the next”. Such common expressions of publicness are discernible throughout MMOGs: in how those participating in these worlds visit well-known landmarks and “see the sites”; in how they trade

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with one another; in how they use the equipment – the forges, locks, looms, and doors – that equally accommodate them and others alike; and in how they generally get around and about the places here in question – by making use of the same roads, paths, highways, and byways as everyone else, and by doing so in ways basically indiscernible from others sharing the same environment.

A more idiosyncratic – yet still recognizable – expression of the publicness of MMOGs comes about primarily as a response to the way in which avatars are usually created. Once again taking *World of Warcraft* as an example, in order to create an avatar for this particular world one has to first select what is referred to as a *class*. Selecting a class partially determines which skills and abilities one will be able to use within the world in question. If someone decides to create a warlock, for example, they will have access to a wide set of abilities that will allow them to summon creatures for aid, transport others quickly around the world, and deal damage by spreading disease and poison – but they will also not be able to defend themselves well in hand-to-hand combat, or cast spells that heal or otherwise aid other players directly. Conversely, if someone decides to create a priest they will have limited offensive powers, but will have access to the widest and most powerful abilities capable of aiding others and themselves (for example, by curing diseases and healing wounds).  

With respect to fallenness, what is important to emphasize here is that the interactions those participating in a MMOG commonly have with one another – how they regard one another, how they talk to one another, how they complete tasks together, and how they come into conflict – are by and large structured by categories according to which any particular individual is taken to be roughly equivalent to another of the same type. In everyday activity, this aspect of fallenness is most evident in how those participating in a MMOG tend to form casual groups. Commonly, what happens when a group is being formed for some specific purpose is that people look to fill certain roles depending on the situation – but who exactly fills these roles is not taken to be of utmost importance. What is needed and called for in conversation is “a tank, two DPS

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165 Even though classes often go by different names in different MMOGs, there is considerable uniformity in terms of function. It is nowadays common to consider the classes of each particular MMOG as sub-classes of four basic archetypes: tanks, healers, ranged damage, and melee damage. What is, in *World of Warcraft*, referred to as a “priest”, for example, is (roughly and with some minor variation) akin to what is referred to, in *EverQuest*, as a “cleric”, and both are considered healers for the purposes of comparing them to tanks and damage dealers.
and a healer” rather than distinct individuals who, in and of themselves, stand out as being of special significance. Likewise, when “advertising” one’s own availability, those participating in a MMOG tend to describe themselves in terms amenable to the system of categorization which undergirds participation. Rather than presenting themselves in terms of their own unique accomplishments, inclinations, limitations, and foilables, those participating in a MMOG tend to seamlessly adapt to the conventions of “das Man” – what one says when trying to get an invitation to a group is just what everyone else of the same class says: “warlock looking for group”.

When differentiation among individuals does take place, it often comes about primarily as a modification of this basic inclination to care first and foremost about the role one can be assigned based on attributes shared by many. For example, if two warlocks attempt to join the same group, what usually determines which one will be invited to join is how well they are likely to satisfy the requirements of their particular role. Which one possess equipment that will allow them to be more effective? Which one displays most evidence of prior success? Which one has a better reputation as a member of the class in question? In these regards, the possibilities of the group as a whole are narrowed through a kind of summary interview in which the best candidate is decided, and wherein what is taken to constitute “the best” is by and large determined not by any particular individual, but by what has already been established by the indistinct plurality that orient everyday projects, desires, needs, and values in the MMOG in question.

Finally, it is also worth emphasizing that this system of categorization does not just provide a basis for the formation of groups – it rather provides a standard in terms of which group dynamics and specific acts carried out while a member of a group tend to be judged. Insofar as one has been accepted into a group on the grounds of a role one can satisfy, what matters for the purposes of the group is how well one meets, and how often one fails to meet, one’s often assumed obligations. In very broad terms, interactions are assessed in terms of whether or not an X is a good X. If one decides, for example, to “try one’s hand” at melee combat as a priest, to refuse to cast healing spells and instead use one’s limited stock of offensive abilities, one is very likely to be “kicked” from the group in question. In a MMOG, violating the sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit norms associated with satisfying a particular role provide grounds for dismissal. In this sense too MMOG reveal a basic tendency to level or limit the possibilities open to one in terms which primarily satisfy the directives of an indistinct many.
Familiar manifestations of idle talk are also readily apparent in MMOGs. The discourse commonly taking place among those participating in these worlds often consists of, for example, topically relevant but second-or-third-hand reports of events or “things which are said to have happened”; statements that present themselves as genuine knowledge, but which establish sometimes imprecise, sometimes marginal, and sometimes only superficial conceptions of things; conversations that obtain authority primarily in virtue of being well-circulated rather than in virtue of being particularly well-founded; discussions which satisfy public discourse, but which do not obtain any further clarity or depth. In fact, the preponderance of what phenomenology would refer to as idle talk in MMOGs has (unknowingly) been given a name by those participating in such worlds based on one of its clearest and most well-known iterations. In *World of Warcraft*, what is referred to as *Barrens Chat* provides something of a paradigm case of the kind of hasty, sprawling, often loquacious, broadly intelligible but often indecisive, disseminate banter which phenomenology holds to orient public discourse. In Barrens Chat discussions range, often with minimal pause, from jokes to requests for assistance; from racial slurs to discussions of theoretical physics; from intentionally aggravating noise to queries about programming; from opinions regarding the features and benefits of a particular class to denigrations of some operating system; from memes to sports; from topics in (Earth) history to strategies for defeating some encounter.

II.b – Two New Modes of Fallenness

In addition to traditional manifestations of fallenness such as the ones described above, what I am going to refer to as *new modes of fallenness* are also evident in MMOGs. I call these modes of fallenness *new* in the sense that they are brought about specifically by the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars that discloses MMOGs as worlds. And I refer to these phenomena specifically as modes of *fallenness* because I believe that they have a propensity to orient understanding away from the ontology of these particular pragmatic shared environments. Just as traditional manifestations of fallenness are held by phenomenology to facilitate a mode of existence in which Dasein does not genuinely understand its own Being, my view is that these new modes of fallenness tend to disrupt apprehension of the way in which MMOGs come to presence as worlds understood in an existential-ontological sense. In what follows, I am going to focus on two new modes of fallenness in particular: what I am going to refer to, respectively, as *concealing conjuncture* and *ambiguating worldliness*. 
Concealing Conjuncture

A host of practices common in MMOGs involve treating avatars in a basically *mechanical* way. What I mean by this, first, is that these activities involve treating avatars – prior to any sort of explicit consideration or analysis – primarily as a means to accomplish some task or end. In these activities, avatars are, without explicit deliberation, taken up and applied as a sort of device to facilitate the completion of a particular project or goal. In this sense, “mechanical” means “done with the aid of what is intuitively treated as a mechanism or tool”. In addition to this, however, I also mean that these activities are mechanical in the sense that they tend to be carried out in what would commonly be regarded as a “machine-like” or “mechanical” manner. These activities tend to be rote. They tend to be completed without much enthusiasm. They tend to involve an excessive attention to detail, and yet do not tend to involve much thought. They tend to be quite stringently ordered, and they are typically conducted as something of a chore that it would be better to automate – or which actually have been automated – as far as is feasible.

A paradigm case of this mechanical activity is provided by what has been referred to previously (on p.33) as *farming*. As discussed, *farming* refers to conduct in which someone attempts to obtain the maximum quantity of something valuable within a particular MMOG, in the shortest amount of time, with the least amount of effort. In essence, farming is an economic enterprise directed towards securing optimal wealth or benefit. Typically, people farm for things such as currency (e.g. gold, platinum, gil, credits), raw materials (e.g. cloth, silk, ore, herbs), items which can be traded to npcs for rewards (e.g. badges, ears, tokens), or goods which can be sold or traded to other participants of the same world (e.g. rare mounts or vehicles, runes, gems, artifacts). Sometimes, people farm in order to obtain currency or commodities which can then be used, sold, or traded for the subsequent betterment of their own avatar(s). However, primarily because of the rote, chore-like nature of farming, this activity has also become one of the foundations of most RMT markets.166 In this latter case, people employed by a 3rd party (e.g. a company such as IGE) are paid an hourly wage in order to farm currency or goods which can then be sold to other participants of a particular MMOG, typically for U.S. dollars. This spares

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166 See p.22.
these participants from having to farm themselves, and allows them to accrue wealth within a MMOG in exchange for common forms of “real world” cash.

 Practically speaking, what people actually do while farming is cyclically complete a series of tasks that tend not to vary much over a continuous period of time, and which are typically completed in the same order, and which ideally present no significant challenge, in order to obtain goods or currency in the most efficient manner possible. Often, people automate farming sessions by compiling macros or using (sometimes illegal) programs to aid control of movements and activities within a particular MMOG. In *World of Warcraft*, for example, someone might “farm for gold” at the satyr camps in Ashzera. In this case, farming would involve locating, targeting, engaging, defeating, and looting the same class of npcs (satyrs) over and over again in roughly the same region, as efficiently as possible, perhaps with the aid of a set of macros, using the same tactics, skills, abilities, and know-how, ideally without pause or interruption, for hours – and possibly even days – at a time.

 There are, of course, many different perspectives that could be appealed to here in order to make sense of the phenomenon of farming in a MMOG. It is at least arguable, for example, that this sort of practice as well as the broader economic purposes it often serves are expressions of a particularly Capitalist worldview that, for example, could be assessed on Marxist grounds. While I do not deny that such perspectives may ultimately be needed in order to flesh out our understanding of such phenomena, for the moment I am going to focus only on one aspect of the existential-ontological impact of such mechanical activities. The hope is that this existential-ontological approach will provide a basis from which to subsequently consider higher order concerns such as, for example, those dealing with the specific socio-economic character of different practices commonly taking place in MMOGs.

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167 These macros and programs are of varying complexity. Sometimes they simply allow a series of abilities to be chained together and executed quickly; sometimes they allow certain abilities to occur automatically under certain conditions; sometimes they augment existing abilities; and sometimes they create entirely new abilities.
In particular, the claim that I want to defend here is that mechanical activities such as farming are fallen in that they have a propensity to conceal conjuncture. What I mean by this is that such activities tend to hide, gloss-over, or prevent apprehension of the co-constitutive way in which Dasein and avatars disclose meaning while someone participates in a MMOG. Such activities are fallen, in other words, in that they tend to orient understanding away from the ontological constitution of avatars as that which is both disclosed and disclosing; both located and locational; both inner-worldly and one of the bases for there being a certain kind of world for Dasein at all. They are fallen in that they tend to prevent apprehension of conjuncture in a way that is appropriate to this phenomenon itself.

Why do I claim that such activities tend to conceal conjuncture? Insofar as mechanical activities such as farming treat avatars as a means to accomplishing a (typically economic) end, they tend to make it seem as if avatars were simply “things” that have a function or serve some purpose within a particular MMOG. They tend, in other words, to make it seem as if avatars were “just” things that someone uses in order to, for example, “make money by farming gold” – much in the same way that someone might, for example, use a pen to “earn a living by writing”, or use a camera to “make money by taking photographs”. In so doing, what this sort of activity orients apprehension away from is that the inner-worldly function which avatars possess is in turn predicated upon the existential-ontological contribution avatars make as beings that work with Dasein to actually disclose MMOGs as sites of meaningful activity. Stated in somewhat different terms, in making it seem as if avatars were “merely” tools, mechanical activity has a propensity to appear to diminish or narrow-down the two-fold nature of avatars to what traditional phenomenology would regard as the Being of equipment alone. And yet this sort of activity only appears to diminish the ontology of avatars because mechanical activity – rote, disengaged, inattentive, instrumental, not mindful, often automatic as it is – is still made possible by the existential intimacy between Dasein and avatars that such conduct seems to do without.

This point can be illustrated through discussion of what happens when mechanical activity in a MMOG breaks down. As I indicated previously, activities such as farming are typically considered a success to the extent that they do not stimulate or engage. If something stimulating or engaging has happened, this invariably means that something has gone wrong – that the cyclical pattern of activity indicative of this sort of conduct has been disrupted or otherwise rendered less than optimal. No matter the extent to which avatars appear to function
seamlessly as the means for obtaining something of value, however, their world-disclosing contribution can never be entirely abolished, but mitigates throughout. At any time, the distance from one target to the next might be misjudged and the activity made less than optimal; the region might be contested by another seeking to farm the same pragmatic shared environment; the value of the currency or commodities sought might diminish due to overabundance; others might pass through the region and accidentally disrupt a chain of events. What happens in these cases is not just that “a MMOG as a whole” comes rushing back, but that the way in which avatars in part determine what comes to presence for Dasein as beings of such-and-such a kind – what Dasein encounters, for example, as a target, as a nuisance, as an obstacle, as an ally, as an impediment, as a danger, etc. – suddenly comes to the fore as that which in part allows even this “mindless” activation of an avatar to have the significance that it actually does. When mechanical activity breaks down, what ceases to be concealed is that avatars are not just entities within-the-world – not just items of equipment ready-to-hand – but that they play a role in creating the spaces within which things can come to presence as opportunities for conducting even primarily instrumental activity. When mechanical activity breaks down, what ceases to be covered over is that avatars are not just located in places where they can be manipulated in particular ways, but that avatars play a role in allowing there to be locations which Dasein finds to be significant and open to such “machinations”.

Mechanical activity in a MMOG, then, is fallen in the sense that it tends to limit apprehension of anything other than the immediate tasks which have to be completed in a certain order using an avatar much as if it were a tool; and yet involves conduct that itself can be carried out only provided the ontological contribution avatars make as that which in part allows there to be, for Dasein, the shared, organizing, orienting, enabling, constraining spaces that MMOGs appear to be.\textsuperscript{168}

\textsuperscript{168} In this sense, it could be said that conceptions of avatars which focus on their alleged instrumentality provide an inauthentic understanding of such beings – an apprehension governed by the mode of fallenness discussed in this section.
Ambiguating Worldliness

The second new mode of fallenness I want to discuss refers to aspects of MMOGs that both contribute to the worldliness of these pragmatic shared environments, and yet also conflict with the experience of these worlds as places in the sense established in chapter 7. I refer to these elements as *ambiguating worldliness* because they possess the paradoxical nature of, on one hand, being in part constitutive of the particular way in which MMOGs world and, on the other hand, clashing or conflicting with how MMOGs are established as regions that tend to impose meaning on the everyday activities of those participating in these places. Here, the notion of ambiguating worldliness is meant to suggest that these elements are not just paradoxical in and of themselves, but that they tend to make the worldliness of the sorts of world at issue here more uncertain and indeterminable than they would be without such elements. For the purposes of the argument which follows, I am going to focus on one such element – what is conventionally referred to as *instancing*.

Instancing refers to a technique in which multiple versions or instances of a particular area of a MMOG are temporarily created for a specific individual, group of individuals, or set of groups. Each instance of an area is “dedicated” in the sense that those other than the individual, group, or groups for whom the instance has been created cannot gain access to the same instance of that area, and are generally able to interact with those in that particular instance only in severely restricted ways (and sometimes not at all). In *Warhammer Online*, for example, the island of Nordenwatch is one of many instanced areas available within this particular MMOG. At any given time, there are typically hundreds of different iterations or versions of this particular area, populated by different sets of participants who can interact with one another and their particular version of Nordenwatch in any number of usual ways, but that cannot interact

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169 *World of Warcraft* describes instancing in the following lay-terms: “An instance is a personal copy of a dungeon for you and your party. The only players in this instance will be yourself and members of your party - no one else can enter your dungeon instance. Instances allow you and a group of friends to have a more personal experience exploring, adventuring, or completing quests in your own private dungeon [...]. Example: Party 1 enters Razorfen Downs, an instance dungeon. They enter copy A of the dungeon. Party 2 comes along 20 minutes later and enters Razorfen Downs. They enter copy B of the dungeon, their own version. They do not come in contact with party 1, except perhaps if they both meet outside the instance. Party 3 comes along an hour later. They enter copy C of the dungeon. Further groups can come along and enter their own copies (example: D, E, F) of the dungeon at any time without having any effect on each other”. See Blizzard Entertainment, Inc., “Instancing”, [http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/basics/instancing.html](http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/basics/instancing.html) (last accessed Aug 10, 2010).
with others in a different instance of the island other than via text, and that cannot, for example, explore these other versions of the island, meet people there, collect resources from them, or otherwise interact with these distinct versions.

My claim is that instancing is ambiguous in the sense that it both facilitates the disclosure of MMOGs as worlds, and yet also clashes with the standard MMOGs set by and for themselves with respect to their own worldliness. Roughly speaking, instances have characteristics both of places in the sense which I have recalled from Heidegger’s use of the term Gegenden, and of what it is tempting to call “non-places” in the sense of spatially incongruent, transient and privatized regions that are discordant with being places in the relevant existential-ontological sense.

In part, instances ambiguage the worldliness of MMOGs in that they are spatially incongruent. On one hand, instances are concretely familiar in the sense that they tend to be experienced as intuitively recognizable locations that, upon analysis, reveal the common characteristics of place discussed in chapter 7. As is the case for other areas of a MMOG, instances appear to be composed of heterogeneous and interconnected domains that, for example, organize the systems of apparently useful things found in them, orient shared pragmatic activity, constrain conduct while also leaving scope for a wide range of individual behavior, and provide sites that help to impose meaning on the collective conduct that is thereby located. What is typically apprehended without effort in an instance of Nordenwatch, for example, are the docks where participants gather or retreat, the lighthouse standing atop the narrow hill beyond the docks, the three paths leading from the docks to the major landmarks of the area, the bridge that often acts as a choke-point, the huts that obscure line-of-site, the others with whom one is allied or against whom one might be in conflict. In addition to this, however, the concrete familiarity of each particular instance of this island is in turn marked by a spatiality that is incongruent with everyday human experience: one in which there can be multiple simultaneous iterations of what would be identified as “the same” location, each isolated not only from each other but from the wider context in which these locations are apparently placed, each giving rise to activities that may be completely incompatible when viewed across multiple instances. Here, it is almost as if each instance is a place out of place – a simultaneously existing region that is at once concretely familiar and alien.
Similarly, instances ambiguate worldliness because they are characterized by a *transience* which clashes with the way in which MMOGs tends to endure. On one hand, the collective activities taking place in instances are primarily of concern to participants because they have an impact on the overall development of the worlds in question. What happens in an instance typically has ramifications beyond the instance itself, and often effects the interactions that participants have with one another and the environment in the non-instanced areas of the world. For example, trade-goods obtained in an instance such as Nordenwatch can still be sold at auction, and therefore affect the economy in the same way as goods obtained in non-instanced locations such as Raven’s End Wood. Grudges which are formed in an instance through a conflict with other participants can last beyond the duration of an instance, and may have a long-term effect on someone’s reputation. A skill that is learned or an ability which is mastered in an instance may improve someone’s ability to navigate and survive outside the instance in the MMOG at-large. And yet, there is also an ephemerality to instances that clashes with the way in which they contribute to an enduring shared environment. While what happens in an instance, or what is obtained in an instance, may last, an instance itself cannot in virtue of its very form. Instances themselves come and go depending on the quantity of those who seek to access them. They increase and decrease in relation to the number of participants interested in them. If an individual for whom an instance has been created leaves the instance, this instance itself ceases to exist: no one else can enter this particular iteration of the location in question, and if there are others present when the individual leaves, they are typically removed from the instance and deposited somewhere else in the world. Unlike the non-instanced regions of a MMOG, sometimes instances are specifically programmed to cease after a set duration (e.g. 15 minutes, 30 minutes, 1 hour); and sometimes they are specifically programmed to cease after certain conditions have been met (for example, after a particularly challenging encounter has been defeated). Although instances help shape the kind of pragmatic shared environments MMOGs appear to be, they do so in virtue of being places that are intrinsically transitory.

Finally, instances are fallen because they are *privatized* in the sense that they are, at once, shared regions which contribute to the collective activity of a MMOG, but which primarily give rise, and are subject, to the concerns and interactions of a tightly-controlled population rather than an indiscernible many. For example, each instance of Nordenwatch permits a maximum of twenty-four participants at any given time. These participants are automatically organized into
two groups, each of which can number no more than twelve, and which represents one of the two major factions of this particular MMOG. This is in marked contrast, for example, with a non-instanced region of the same MMOG such as Raven’s End Wood. At any given time, this latter area might be occupied by hundreds – or by dozens, or by no one at all. At any given time, the population of this latter area might be evenly distributed among the two major factions, or it might be marginally skewed, or it might be radically skewed, in favor of one or the other. Moreover, as I have already indicated, while a non-instanced region such as Raven’s End Wood persists even if and when no particular individual is active in this area, if no one is active in an instance of Nordenwatch, that instance itself ceases to exist.

While instances are tightly controlled, however, they are still open to the concerns and projects of those who might not actually be in any instance whatsoever, let alone “the same” instance. Someone participating in an instance of Nordenwatch, for example, might suddenly receive a message from their friend in Raven’s End Wood, and leave the instance (and their companions in the instance) in order to participate in some other activity. Doing so affects not only what might happen in the instance, but in the non-instanced region in question as well. The value of commodities and currency obtained in an instance are subject to the demands of a particular MMOG’s population as a whole, and is also effected by the supply of commodities that comes from both instanced and non-instanced areas of that world. Even while an individual may access an instance by themselves in order to have more control over the activities they perform, they cannot in so doing prevent either other instances of the same location or the non-instanced areas alongside that instance from impacting what they do in the space they have instigated, any more than they can prevent their actions within that instance from possibly affecting the world at large. Although the collective activity taking place in instances is bounded in different ways and to different extents than the non-instanced areas of a MMOG, the contour of these shared pragmatic activities as whole still affects, and is affected by, areas in which the interactions of a particular sub-group come to the fore.

Once again, it is important to emphasize that there are various perspectives that might help us make sense of phenomena such as instancing in a MMOG. For example, it might be thought that these spatially incongruent, transient, activity-specific locations function in a MMOG much in the same way that, for example, stages in a theatre, or playing fields in an arena function in “the real world”. If this is so, perhaps this is one point at which appealing to, for
example, some notion of a “magic circle”, or to Huizinga’s notion of “play” may further our understanding of MMOGs. Perhaps instances are akin to “play spaces within a game” – areas cordoned off from the ordinary activities taking place in a MMOG in order to provide participants places to play without impacting the broader online environment. To repeat, however, while I do not deny that such perspectives may ultimately be needed in order to flesh out our understanding of this sort of phenomena, I here intend to focus only on what I take to be one existential-ontological impact of this phenomenon in particular. In this respect, there are two points that I want to bookmark and that I will return to discuss in further detail on p.166 ff.

The first is that, taken as a whole, the preceding analysis of fallenness and MMOGs provides further grounds for interpreting MMOGs as worlds understood in an existential-ontological sense. Overall, the analysis suggests that fallenness too is an ontologically continuous aspect of MMOGs that helps make MMOGs concretely familiar. In other words, and to return to one of the questions which initiated my preliminary interpretation of MMOGs (see p.101), the analysis suggests that part of what allows MMOGs to be experienced as heterogeneous, interconnected, pragmatic shared environments is that they do indeed exhibit characteristics of fallenness – that they are sites in which features of fallenness such as the publicness of “das Man” and of idle talk take hold.

In addition, however, the preceding analysis also suggests that ontological continuity with Being-in-the-world cannot alone account for the particular way in which MMOGs world. While there is something identifiable as fallenness at work in MMOGs, it also appears that fallenness has been “tweaked” or “torqued” by these places in a way that makes it stand out or come to the fore in a different manner than is normally the case. Here, difference is apparent, first, in how mechanical activities such as farming conceal not Dasein’s way of Being from itself, but the mode of disclosure which I have called conjuncture from itself; and, second, in how the specific worldliness of MMOGs is in part constituted by ambiguities that both contribute to, and conflict with, the everyday reception of these worlds as places in an existential-ontological sense. The worldliness of MMOGs now appears to be an especially complicated kind of worldliness – not straightforwardly identifiable with the world of Dasein as traditionally conceived, and yet also home to fundamental existential-ontological characteristics of everyday Being-in-the-world such as fallenness.
For this reason, I think it is also opportune to suggest at this point that having access to a concept capable of accounting for both aspects of the worlds here in question – a concept capable of doing justice to, for example, the kind of ontologically continuous but different fallenness that has come to the fore in this section – would significantly enhance our understanding of MMOGs at an existential-ontological level. So far, ontological continuity has proven to be a useful guide: it has allowed us to make sense of the specifically locational way in which meaning is created and imposed in a MMOG. But following up on this continuity has now revealed a partner – a measure of ontological difference – that still needs to factor into the interpretation of these places in a systematic way. Having access to a concept capable of achieving this end would evidently be of real merit. Ultimately, what I will propose in chapter 9 is to understand the ontological continuity and difference of MMOGs in terms of a particular concept of virtuality.

For now, however, I want to turn to the second aspect of everyday Being-in-the-world to be considered in this chapter – that of thrownness.

III – Thrownness and MMOGs

Apparently unlike the case of fallenness, observation suggests – at least at first – that the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars that discloses MMOGs as worlds does not facilitate thrownness, but rather abates this particular aspect of Being-in-the-world. Although the situation turns out to be not as straightforward as this, it is useful to begin with this abatement both for the insights it affords, and also in order to see what this abatement leaves undiscovered.

III.a – Abating Thrownness

In order to explain what I mean by claiming that conjuncture abates thrownness, I am going to introduce the idea of existential weight. Existential weight refers to the force a phenomenon exerts on human existence. The greater something’s existential weight, the greater force it exerts on the human way of Being. The less existential weight a phenomenon has, the less it influences, impels, constrains, and motivates what it is to be human. The notion of existential weight will be used relativistically. To say that something is less existentially weighty does not mean that it lacks force absolutely, but only that it does not make the same existential-ontological imposition as something else, or as itself in another context. Similarly, to say that something has greater existential weight means that it has relatively more influence on the human way of Being than
something to which it is compared. I believe that the notion of existential weight is useful because it allows us to interpret phenomena in terms of existential-ontological *gradations*, rather than in terms of simply having or not-having certain ontological features. In other words, the idea of existential weight allows us to assess phenomena in terms of the relative preponderance of a variable or of variables, not in terms of the sheer absence or presence of a characteristic or characteristics.

To say that conjuncture abates thrownness, then, means that conjuncture diminishes the existential weight of being thrown – but it also means that conjuncture does not directly oppose or counter or nullify or overthrow this existentiale. Conjuncture allows the weight of being thrown to – at least for a time and under certain conditions – bear less on Dasein than is the case for Dasein alone, but it does not do this by overriding thrownness, and it does not allow Dasein to be without thrownness, or to act or seem as if it were not thrown, or to understand itself as a being that is not thrown. Conjuncture temporarily slackens some of the many tensions inherent to human existence, but others it leaves quite untouched.

How does conjuncture abate thrownness? By enabling Dasein to participate in a certain kind of pragmatic shared environment according to conditions that Dasein, as traditionally conceived, cannot determine for itself. Recall that, according to the traditional phenomenological conception of thrownness, existence is defined by two basic limitations: by Dasein’s inability to choose to inhabit a world in the first place; and by Dasein’s inability to determine for itself all of the factors which constitute the situations wherein its activities take place. My claim is that conjoining with avatars presents Dasein with one way of partially eluding the first of these limitations, and substantially loosening the restrictions of the second. I will discuss each of these in turn.

First, while it is not possible for Dasein to elect to be a worldly being, whether or not Dasein participates in any particular MMOG clearly is a choice that Dasein can make in the course of everyday existence. Participating in this kind of pragmatic shared environment is something that Dasein can elect or not elect to do, something that Dasein can decide either in

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170 See p.143.
favor of or against, something that Dasein can determine for itself, either by itself or through discussion with others.

Insofar as MMOGs are worlds conceived in an existential-ontological sense, having the choice of whether or not to become a being that is involved with this particular kind of pragmatic shared environment affords Dasein a degree of freedom that runs orthogonal to the first basic limitation of human thrownness. Unlike “the” world of Dasein alone, MMOGs provide worlds that Dasein can “lead itself into, and do so of its own accord”.\(^\text{171}\) In being so constituted, these particular places engender forms of collective activity at least in part on the basis of a kind of “suspension” of one of the basic strictures of Being-in-the-world as traditionally conceived. Stated in somewhat different terms, when Dasein conjoins with avatars to disclose a MMOG as a world, it obtains a measure of freedom from its own existential-ontological constitution: the freedom to decide whether or not to ever have had anything at all to do with a particular pragmatic shared environment – the freedom to decide nothing less than whether or not some environment will actually be an environment (in the sense of a “world around and about”) for itself.

Second, conjuncture abates thrownness by enabling Dasein to shape the situations wherein shared pragmatic activity takes place in different ways than is possible for Dasein alone. In so doing, conjuncture once again provides Dasein a measure of existential-ontological freedom not enjoyed by Being-in-the-world as traditionally conceived. In what follows, I provide three illustrations of this kind of freedom:

- Just as it is not possible for someone to decide whether or not to exist in the first place, it is not possible for someone to determine where their own existence will begin. It is simply not up to them to decide. On the other hand, it is possible for someone to choose the place where activities within a MMOG will begin. Once they have decided to participate at all, it is up to them to determine where collective activity within this particular kind of pragmatic environment will take its start. While it was not possible for me to elect to be born in Portsmouth, for example, I did decide that my activities in Norrath would begin from

\(^{171}\) See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p.329 where Heidegger writes “Dasein is something that has been thrown; it has been brought into its “there”, but not of its own accord”.
Qeynos rather than Freeport. One way in which conjuncture loosens the restrictions of thrownness, then, is by allowing someone to determine for themselves the place from which their dealings with others and a certain kind of environment originate.

- Similarly, while it is not possible for someone to select the point in time when their own existence will begin, it is possible for someone to determine (roughly, and with some margin of error) when they will become involved in the shared pragmatic activity taking place within a MMOG. The point when one starts to develop a history within this particular sort of environment is, broadly speaking, up to someone to decide for themselves. For example, while I did not elect to start existing on June 21, 1972, I did decide to begin participating in the world of Azeroth at midnight on “launch day” rather than an hour or a day or so later. A second way in which conjuncture diminishes the existential weight of being thrown, then, is by allowing someone to determine for themselves the moment in time when their dealings with others and a particular environment will start.

- Third, while it is possible, at least to some extent, for someone to alter what are normally referred to as “physical features” (e.g. eye-color, hair-color, height, etc.) in the course of everyday existence, it is not possible for someone to initially select these features and traits for themselves. Changes can only come about subsequent to the features which one already possesses, and which one possesses irrespective of one’s own desires, intents, and concerns. This is a straightforward manifestation of human thrownness. Within a MMOG however, it is often possible for someone to exert a significant measure of control directly over how such features first appear – to immediately choose how tall their appearance will be within a particular MMOG, with what color hair, of what girth, and even whether they will appear to be male or female. A third way in which conjuncture slackens the restrictions of thrownness, then, is by allowing someone to first of all determine how they will appear within the kinds of pragmatic shared environment here in question.

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172 I say “roughly and with some margin of error” because of issues such as latency, connectivity problems, application errors, etc.
To summarize, then, my claim in this section is that conjuncture abates thrownness by enabling Dasein to participate in worldly, shared, pragmatic activities according to conditions that Dasein, as traditionally conceived, cannot set for itself. Before I discuss the limits of this claim, however, I want to once again bookmark a point that I will return to on p.166 ff.

In my view, initial analysis of thrownness and MMOGs provides further grounds for thinking that ontological continuity alone cannot account for the Being of these particular kinds of pragmatic shared environment. Because conjuncture does not leave thrownness “untouched”, but diminishes the existential weight of being thrown, the ontology of MMOGs once again appears to be marked by a measure of difference from Being-in-the-world as traditionally conceived. To illustrate this point further, compare the preceding discussion with the analysis of fallenness conducted on p.145 - 158. Whereas analysis of fallenness suggested first that MMOGs are recognizable sites of fallen Being-in-the-world, analysis of thrownness suggests first that the particular way in which these worlds world is not simply continuous with the Being of Dasein, but is marked by an alteration with how Dasein’s thrownness itself manifests with respect to a particular kind of pragmatic shared environment. In this regard, it might even be thought that, while fallenness appears to be part of what allows MMOGs to come to presence as concretely familiar pragmatic shared environments, analysis of thrownness suggests instead that MMOGs are taken by Dasein to be concretely familiar places despite the way in which they abate the thrown nature of human existence. Ontological difference has appeared – once again – to be something that needs to be systematically worked into the analysis of MMOGs.

The issue that I want to discuss subsequenly, however, is also related to this re-appearance of ontological difference. For even while the initial analysis of thrownness and MMOGs carried out previously is not inaccurate or misleading, it focuses only on one side of what proves to be an essentially bilateral phenomenon. While the conditions of participation enabled by conjuncture are ontologically different from the way in which “everyday” Being-in-the-world is thrown, these conditions themselves have existential weight only because they are “also” ontologically continuous with Dasein’s existence. In order to substantiate this claim, it is necessary to revisit the preceding discussion of thrownness and MMOGs.
III.b – Limits of Conjuncture

While it is true that Dasein can choose whether or not to participate in any particular MMOG, electing to participate in any such world immediately subjects Dasein to limitations that manifest in virtue of the particular way in which conjuncture discloses this type of environment. All MMOGs have rules, norms, and customs – some of which are relatively set in stone, and some of which have a history and develop over time – which are unproblematically taken into account and bind collective activity as soon as one begins participating in a MMOG, regardless of whether or not any particular individual wants them or takes them to be so. In other words, choosing to participate in any such world immediately makes one accountable to conditions that one has not and cannot set for one’s self — conditions that shape one’s collective activities, interests, projects, ways of being involved, and interactions with others even if one would rather not be so conditioned, even if one strives to overthrow these conditions, and even if one wishes to ignore them entirely. Part and parcel of what makes these worlds concretely familiar is that these places limit collective activity in ways that inevitable shape what any particular Dasein does.

For example, as soon as one begins participating in *Warhammer Online*, one is part of a struggle between forces aligned in terms of a traditional opposition between law and chaos. The respective ethos of each of these factions infuses the world, and cannot be avoided even if one would rather have nothing at all to do with this particular struggle. At any given time this struggle can sweep someone up — one’s possibilities are always to some extent informed or delimited by this characteristic of the environment in which collective activity takes place. What one comes to see as a threat, an opportunity, a likely course of action, an impossibility, a friend, is in part defined by limits that are set prior to, and as a condition for, any particular individual’s everyday participations in this place. While different worlds may have different sets of rules, norms, and customs which in turn may develop in different or similar ways — none of these places have no such rules, norms, and customs; and it is not clear what it would even be like for this to be the case.

Similarly, while it is in some cases true that one can choose where to begin participating in a MMOG, choosing any particular place immediately subjects one to environmental conditions (of the kind discussed in chapter 7) that one cannot determine for themselves. For
example, while someone may elect to begin participating in Cabilis rather than Neriak, it is not open for them to decide that Cabilis will be received as a ruined city of a now-destitute empire, rather than as a site of existing wealth and power, nor is it up to them to select what constitutes the “ruinedness” of this particular environment. Rather, the characteristics of this particular heterogeneous, interconnected region – its dead-ends, aqueducts, fallen temples, empty streets – as well as who else is located at this place at this particular time, are factors that anyone starting in this particular location has to, and can only, deal with once they have begun.

It is also true that someone can (again, roughly and with some margin of error) select when they will begin participating in a MMOG. However, the “timeline” of these worlds is, on one hand, broadly defined independently of those who choose to participate at one moment rather than another; and, on the other hand, is also capable of being influenced by those who elect to participate in ways that partially depend upon the point in time when their participations begin. For example, someone can begin participating in Lord of The Rings Online when they like. However, once they begin participating they have to deal with features of what is referred to as “The Second Age of Middle-earth”. Likewise, the economy, values, concerns, and projects of the collectivity participating in this world at the same time in part shape how others and objects within the environment come to presence even as one begins. For example, if one began participating in EverQuest on launch-day, possessing what is referred to as a combine weapon would have held a huge amount of monetary value, signified a level of prestige and knowledge, and generally marked one out as being of interest to others sharing the world. If one began participating in EverQuest a year after launch-day, possessing a combine weapon would be practically worthless, even embarrassing. Here, the point is that even though someone can determine when they will begin participating in this particular kind of pragmatic shared environment, they cannot determine how this particular time will impact the possibilities open to them – this is in part determined by others, and in part by the characteristics of the environment in question.

It is also commonly the case that one can select, for example, the race, sex, abilities and skills of an avatar, as well as determine – typically within a pre-determined color palette and within broadly pre-defined margins – what are typically referred to as an avatar’s “physical characteristics” such as height, girth, hair-color, and eye-color. However, not only are these particular options typically quite restricted (for example, in no current MMOG is it possible to
have no skin, or “two left feet”, or to be infinitely tall, or to have a completely unique gait), but actually selecting any of these options immediately makes one subject to perceptions, prejudices, and opportunities that are shaped collectively and that each individual has only a limited ability to influence. In other words, while it is broadly within someone’s power to determine how they will appear within a MMOG, how one is actually received in the world in question is not something that one determines for one’s self. For example, in World of Warcraft, electing to create a Female Blood Elf Paladin with blue eyes and long blonde hair will (for reasons which are actually quite complicated, and which I will not go into here) makes it much more likely that one will be regarded “less seriously” (to put it conservatively), at least prior to subsequent interactions, than, for example, someone who has created an Undead Rogue with no particularly noteworthy features. Similarly, while someone can elect some of the skills which they will use while participating in a MMOG, they are not able to determine, for example, which skills are going to be regarded as valuable by the collectivity among which these skills are put to use, which skills are going to be regarded as less valuable or perhaps even useless, which skills it will turn out to be easy to master and which ones it will be difficult to advance. Nor can someone determine for themselves the aptitude they will actually have for executing these skills in practice.

The underlying point that I am driving at here is that the existential-ontological freedom brought about by the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars also submits Dasein to limitations that constrain the possible ways in which collective activity can come to presence within these pragmatic shared environments, and that, as such, can be interpreted as exhibitions of thrownness. Contrary to what has often been claimed about MMOGs (for example, by Castronova, Ludlow, Wallace, et al.), these places do not provide someone with unbounded or limitless opportunities for individual expression and creativity. Rather, they provide a unique and yet still genuinely human kind of freedom: namely, one that is liberating only because it is simultaneously binding at an existential-ontological level. Stated in somewhat different terms, even though conjuncture “tweaks” or “torques” thrownness in a way that diminishes the potency of certain restrictions inherent to human existence, there is nonetheless something identifiably thrown about the collective activities taking place within MMOGs.
This re-assessment of thrownness and MMOGs in turn suggests an amendment to the point I bookmarked on p.162. For even while conjuncture does abate thrownness and, in so doing, introduce a measure of ontological difference, insofar as MMOGs limit Dasein’s possibilities in terms of conditions that an individual does not determine for itself, these worlds also appear to be ontologically continuous with Being-in-the-world in the sense of being places over to which Dasein is thrown. Thus, while it may have been thought at first that MMOGs are taken by Dasein to be concretely familiar places despite the way in which they abate the thrown nature of human existence; it appears upon further examination that thrownness too is a phenomenon that in part allows Dasein to register these places as worlds.

In order to conclude this chapter, I want to describe schematically what I think has become evident as this analysis of MMOGs has developed.

IV

First, I believe that the preceding analysis of fallenness, thrownness, and MMOGs has provided additional depth and rigour to my preliminary interpretation of MMOGs as worlds. MMOGs have been shown to be sites of fallen Being-in-the-world into which Dasein is in certain regards thrown. They are environments wherein publicness, idle talk, and ambiguity often frame a wide array of collective practices; and which diminish the existential weight of certain basic strictures of being human, and yet which subject Dasein to limitations that condition how these particular worlds manifest in everyday experience.

In addition, I believe that the preceding analysis also suggests that there is a need to do some constructive work on the framework that informs this interpretation of MMOGs as a whole. Within the context of this analysis,

- Fallenness has manifested as an ontologically continuous but different phenomenon: one characterized both by traditional exhibitions of fallen existence (such as publicness and idle talk) and modes of fallenness brought about specifically by conjuncture (such as mechanical activity that conceals the existential intimacy of Dasein and avatars).
• Thrownness has manifested as an *ontologically different but continuous* phenomenon: one that genuinely abates certain aspects of Being thrown, and yet which makes Dasein accountable to places that are never entirely its own, and which reinforce various aspects of the finitude that in part defines human existence.

In order to do justice to the phenomena of MMOGs, then, what seems to be required is a way of systematically dealing with the *different intensities and combinations of existential-ontological differences and continuities* that characterize the worldliness of these particular pragmatic shared environments. MMOGs world – but not, it turns out, simply in the way in which “the” world worlds; and not, it also turns out, in an altogether distinct way either.

For this reason, what I propose in the following chapter is a way of thinking about MMOGs that is capable of elegantly accounting for the kinds of continuity and difference that have become evident through analysis of MMOGs and, in so doing, will facilitate a deeper interpretation of MMOGs than has so far been possible for this analysis itself. This proposal involves conceiving the virtuality of MMOGs in terms of what I refer to as the *creative repetition of ontological structures of human existence.*
9 Interpreting MMOGs as Virtual Worlds

In Part 1 of this dissertation, I argued that, although MMOGs are often taken to be virtual worlds, common conceptions of virtual have not proven to be helpful, and may even be dangerous, for understanding MMOGs. In this chapter, I propose a conception of virtuality that I think is helpful, avoids issues of the kind discussed in Part 1, and that will ultimately provide greater insight into the phenomena of MMOGs.

My proposal is to conceive of the virtuality of MMOGs in terms of what I refer to as the creative repetition of ontological structures of human existence. In essence, this proposal involves thinking of the virtuality of these pragmatic shared environments as a liminal space bordering both sameness and non-identity assessed at an existential-ontological level. The notion of creative repetition which informs this concept of virtuality alludes to the idea that attempting to understand MMOGs by comparing them to “the real world” using categories such as sameness, identity, resemblance, similarity, or equivalence (at least as traditionally conceived) does not quite fit, and in some cases even jars, with the differing intensities and combinations of ontological continuities and ontological differences exhibited by MMOGs.

Overall, this concept of virtuality is meant to provide a perspicuous method for focusing on what I think chapters 6 – 8 of this dissertation have shown to be characteristic of MMOGs in general: namely, that even while there are grounds for taking MMOGs to be worlds in an existential-ontological sense, the worldliness of these places is:

1. Not ontologically unique, a totally new region of Being;
2. Not ontologically the same as, simply co-extensive with, the Being of world as traditionally conceived; and,
3. Not just similar to, or like in some respects but not in others, the worldliness of Dasein alone.

In the sense proposed here, to refer to MMOGs as virtual worlds is to designate these places as ones which creatively repeat the worldliness of Being-in-the-world in that, for example, they enable fallenness and thrownness of a kind which is “more than” similar to fallenness and
thrownness as usually conceived, but also “other than” straightforwardly identifiable with these two existentiales, and yet still not just “different from” them either.

This way of referring to MMOGs is meant to be both descriptive and prescriptive. It is descriptive in the sense that it is meant to provide a way of elegantly expressing the combinations of ontological continuities and ontological differences which have already been discussed in the preceding chapters of this dissertation. So, for example, referring to the kind of falleness discussed in chapter 8 as virtual falleness would now be legitimate and would have genuine content: it would designate this particular kind of falleness as one which creatively repeats fallen Being-in-the-world by facilitating forms of publicness, idle talk, and ambiguity that both continue and yet are different than the falleness of Dasein as traditionally conceived.

This concept of virtuality is prescriptive in the sense that it is also meant to provide a perspective from which to extend the interpretation that I have already developed for certain phenomena, and to provide insight into other phenomena which come to light as a result of thinking about the virtuality of MMOGs in the way that I propose. To regard something as virtual in the relevant sense means to attempt to identify and understand the ways in which it creatively repeats a certain ontology. Practically, what this involves is attempting to discern and describe combinations of ontological continuities and ontological differences of different intensities and prevalence as they manifest within a particular phenomenal region.

Even though the concept of virtuality proposed here has been induced hermeneutically from out of the preceding analysis of MMOGs, it is not intended to be restricted to the analysis of these pragmatic shared environments alone. Although I suspect that this concept might prove useful in discussions that take electronic digital computing technologies in general as their subject, I will not attempt to establish this point here. With that being said, however, one approach to establishing the wider utility of this concept would be to consider questions such as “How does HTML creatively repeat the ontology of writing?” or “How does an e-book creatively repeat the ontology of the book” or “How does RAM creatively repeat the ontology of memory?”, and then to see whether or not these sorts of question prove useful for understanding the particular technology in question. In addition, it is also worth emphasizing that there is

\[173\] Note also, however, that I am not convinced that the merit or value of the concept in question depends on it having wider application – sometimes what is needed is just a very specific tool.
nothing intrinsically “technological” about the concept of virtuality I propose: what is virtual in this sense is that which creatively repeats existential-ontological structures of human existence. This concept is proposed ultimately as a way of capturing the differences and continuities of any phenomena assessed at an existential-ontological level, regardless of whether or not they stem from or involve what would normally be referred to as “technologies”.

It is also important to note that the concept of virtuality proposed in this chapter is not prone to the challenges I raised for common conceptions of virtual in Part 1 of this dissertation. The reason for this is because this concept of virtuality does not involve conceiving the virtual as somehow not quite real, or other than fully actual, or as something that may have the appearance or features or effects of reality without actually being real. Not only is the concept proposed in this chapter not “oppositional” in any of these particular senses, the underlying purposes of the concept itself is to introduce a way of thinking about phenomena that (a) does not involve thinking about them in terms of any opposition whatsoever and, (b) takes account of differences and continuities and intensities at an ontological level rather than at the level of “reality” or “actuality”. In this sense, even though the concept of creative repetition introduced in this chapter is not one of the familiar concepts of traditional phenomenology, my use of this concept does correspond well with the underlying impulse of phenomenological epoche: namely, to suspend considerations about the reality or non-reality of phenomena in order to focus on their Being.

The idea of creative ontological repetition, while not drawn directly from any particular philosopher or group of philosophers, has points of contact with diverse thinkers (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, Deleuze, et al.), each of which maintain variegated historical and conceptual relationships to the kind of phenomenology which has been provisionally orienting Part 2 of this dissertation. For this reason, there is a real danger that attempting to describe these points of contact in the detail they ultimately deserve will detract from, and perhaps even overwhelm, the main objective of this dissertation, which remains to focus on MMOGs rather than on the lineage of concepts which hopefully aid their study. To thoroughly trace the influences which have led to the idea of creative repetition proposed here would really require a companion work.

With that being said, however, it is worthwhile to discuss one particular moment in which several of these points of contact coalesce and, in so doing, become discernible as something like
inspiration for the notion of creative ontological repetition at work in the concept of virtuality I have proposed. This moment arrives several times during Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence, in particular when he writes in *Difference and Repetition*,

> When Nietzsche presents the eternal return as the immediate expression of the will to power, will to power does not at all mean ‘to want power’ but, on the contrary, whatever you will, will it to the ‘nth’ power – in other words, separate out the superior form by virtue of the selective operation of thought in the eternal return, by virtue of the singularity of repetition in the eternal return itself. Here, in the superior form of everything that is, we find the immediate identity of the eternal return and the Overman.  

And again when he writes later that,

> That is why the Overman is defined as the superior form of everything that is. We must discover what Nietzsche means by noble: he borrows the language of energy physics and calls noble that energy which is capable of transforming itself.

There are, of course, labyrinths of ideas which could be entered by way of these quotes alone. But, once again, for the purposes of this dissertation, I want to focus on the following two ideas.

First, in these quotes repetition is made out by Deleuze to be a *selective force*. Unlike, for example, what Deleuze would call “repetition of the Same” (i.e. mute, habitual, mundane, cyclical repeating) creative repetition is here held to be the expression of a certain kind of deep vitality. It signifies the exuberance of being able to come back or return – an overabundance in which what something is overflows into its power to become not simply other than what it is, but itself again (and again…). That which creatively repeats does so in virtue of its strength, and that

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175 Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 41.
which only lasts or endures as it is does so because it lacks a certain kind of vitality. Creative repetition is extreme affirmation. It “uncovers the superior form of everything that is”.¹⁷⁶

Second, these quotes also describe the specific kind of vitality held to be at one with creative repetition: namely, the power that something has to transform itself. In this context, that which is most “noble” is that which repeats, and in repeating manifests a power to alter or change itself – which is to say, a power to genuinely be what it is and to introduce a gap or distance within itself that still does not sunder it from what it has been (itself) and from what it will be (itself). This power is “interior” to what repeats in the sense that it flows from within that which is itself subject to the power which manifests. And once again, that which does not repeat does so because it lacks this specific kind of force: perhaps it is subject only to changes instigated from without, or perhaps it is totally inert and capable of no alteration whatsoever.

In what regard do these two notions inspire the concept of virtuality proposed in this chapter? Primarily in that they orient a suggestion that I also want to ultimately make, at least tentatively, about MMOGs in particular – a suggestion which lies at the very outer edge of what I think it is legitimate at this point to say, but which will also in part guide the analyses which will follow in the remainder of this dissertation. What is this suggestion? That in virtue of being virtual in the relevant sense, MMOGs can be interpreted both as a manifestation of a vitality that lies within human existence itself – the power to alter or transform nothing less than the nature of its own Being; and as a particular engine of change in the sense of a phenomenon which assists the driving force of alteration to power existence itself from within itself. Stated in somewhat different terms, the suggestion is that, in and through creatively repeating ontological structures of Being-in-the-world, MMOGs can be interpreted at once as a product of a certain kind of exuberance, something created out of an affirmation of existence itself, and as a producer of this very “noble power” through which Dasein transforms itself from within existence to become what it is in a continuous-but-different way.

¹⁷⁶ Deleuze, Difference and Repetition, 55.
Although I want to suspend further discussion of this tentative suggestion for the time being, it is important to keep this suggestion in reserve through the analyses which follow. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I will return to this suggestion in order to discuss what I think may be the ultimate source of the “transformative existential power” at home in the concept of virtuality I propose: the temporal constitution of Dasein.
10 Virtual Death: A Preliminary Phenomenological Analysis

In this chapter, I apply the concept of virtuality proposed in chapter 9 in order to extend the preceding analysis of MMOGs, and to demonstrate the utility of this concept itself. Because it is not feasible to consider all of the phenomena that might be held to contribute to the virtuality of MMOGs, I focus on one phenomenon that touches upon each of the major themes discussed thus far in Part 2 of this dissertation. Discussing this particular phenomenon also provides a means of access to a well-known existential-ontological issue that still needs to be addressed in the context of this analysis, especially in light of the discussion of fallenness and thrownness conducted in chapter 8: the issue of inauthenticity and MMOGs.

Informally, and at a surface level, the phenomenon I am going to discuss can be initially thought of as “an avatar’s death(s)” or “the death(s) of an avatar”. The phenomenon that I have in mind here is (once again, at least informally, and at a surface level) the kind of thing that happens, for example, when an avatar falls off cliffs from a great height and lands on a bed of rocks, or when it succumbs to disease, or when it takes too much damage from combat, or when it drowns from swimming for too long. Because analysis of this phenomenon will turn out to be quite complicated, before I begin this analysis itself I am going to discuss three reasons for focusing on this phenomenon in particular (i.e. over other phenomena that might also be held to touch upon each of the major themes discussed thus far in Part 2 of this dissertation). After discussing these reasons I will explicitly outline the argument that will follow.

177 I write that this phenomenon can be thought of as “an avatar’s death(s)” or “the death(s) of an avatar” (expressions which I take to be equivalent) because, even though I think that it makes intuitive sense to think of the phenomenon in question in this way, it is not clear that it actually is thought of in this way by those commonly experiencing it. For example, what is usually said when (as one might say) “an avatar dies” is typically (something like) “I died” or “You died” or “Kevin died” or “Kreekybonez died” and not “An avatar died” or “My avatar died” or “Your avatar died” or “Her/his avatar died” or “It died” – expressions which would seem to be more indicative of the intuitive way of regarding “an avatar’s death(s)” mentioned here.
I have three reasons for focusing on what I am calling “an avatar’s death(s)”. The first two reasons have to do with the appearance of this phenomenon. The third reason has to do with how analyzing this phenomenon may help advance understanding of an issue for which the groundwork has already been laid, but which was left unarticulated during my interpretation of fallenness and thrownness. The issue I have in mind here is whether or not, how, to what extents, and to what ends conjuncture might facilitate a mode of existence that could be legitimately interpreted either as inauthentic or as authentic in an existential-ontological sense.

First, with respect to the appearance of this phenomenon, it is puzzling that what I am referring to as “an avatar’s death(s)” is commonly experienced by those participating in MMOGs as something-like-a-death at all – and not merely, for example, as “a penalty”, or “a timeout”, or “an out-of-bounds”, or “a stoppage in play”, or “a knockout”. It is not obvious why something-like-a-death should be experienced by those participating in these worlds in the first place. And there are sensible reasons for thinking that MMOGs would be (or perhaps should be) places where even something-like-a-death is absent or “has no business”. For example, it makes sense to think that avatars are not organic in a straightforward biological sense, so why should what happens to “them” ever be experienced as something-like-a-death at all? Moreover, as I mentioned in chapter 4, it is often claimed that MMOGs provide (or should provide) a utopic getaway from everyday consternations and concerns, and focus primarily (or should focus primarily) on enabling participants to have basically uninterrupted enjoyment. If this is indeed how these places are constituted (or how they should be constituted), why would MMOGs risk “shattering the illusion” by permitting even something-like-a-death to be experienced?

Second, it is also puzzling that what is experienced by those participating in MMOGs as something-like-a-death is not a liminal experience, but is rather one that pervades the kind of pragmatic shared environments under discussion here. Far from rare or unusual, “the death(s) of an avatar” are more than common – they are totally routine. Moreover, to put it somewhat flat-footedly, it is similarly puzzling that what would typically be regarded as “one and the same” avatar can, and typically does, something-like-die many times. In fact, it is not only “an avatar’s

178 This seems to be Castronova’s view at least in Exodus To The Virtual World.
death(s)” which pervade MMOGs, it is the organized presentation of a host of overt and automatically recognizable signifiers of something-like-a-death (graves, headstones, churches, memorials, tombs, shrines, skeletons, spirits/ghosts, an “afterlife”) as well as myriad discussions devoted to this very topic: how to (temporarily) avoid something-like-a-death, reports of something-like-a-death happening, discussions of the effects of something-like-a-death on individuals and groups, etc. With respect to the appearance of this phenomenon, then, the fact that something-like-a-death manifests for those participating in MMOGs at all, and does so so commonly in and of itself warrants taking a closer look at this phenomenon in particular.

My third reason for focusing on “an avatar’s death(s)” takes its lead from the phenomenological perspective I have been provisionally following in Part 2 of this dissertation. To begin, although I did not explicitly draw the following conclusion at the time, I believe that the analysis of fallenness, thrownness, and MMOGs conducted in chapter 8 suggests – at least at initially – that conjuncture facilitates what phenomenology would interpret as a basically inauthentic mode of existence. What I mean by this is that, insofar as MMOGs creatively repeat aspects of fallen Being-in-the-world such as publicness, idle-talk, and ambiguity, as well as diminish the existential weight of being thrown, there are grounds for thinking that these worlds are places that subject participants to the kind of self-alienating forces held by phenomenology to disrupt Dasein’s ability to take proper ownership [Eigentum] of its owns [eigen] existence (to once again echo the root meaning of the German “eigen”). Insofar as collective pragmatic activity within these worlds is broadly characterized by possibilities fixed by and large by an indeterminate plurality from which individuals for the most part do not stand out; and insofar as these worlds disburden [entlasten] participants from (at least some of the) usual limitations of being human, there is reason to interpret MMOGs as places in which participants lack, and are even actively dissuaded from developing, a mode of self-apprehension that is appropriate to human existence. To state the same claim in somewhat different terms, analysis of the kind of fallenness and thrownness that comes to bear upon Dasein by way of conjuncture suggests that another factor that makes MMOGs ontological continuous is that these places share an existential paradox with what would normally be referred to as “the” world: namely, that the

\[179\] See p.142.
locations where everyday residing happens are places in which individuals tend to be not at home [unheimlich] with their own way of Being.\textsuperscript{180}

Framed by a traditional phenomenological approach, moreover, the seeming manifestation of inauthenticity in the context of this analysis is likely to raise the following sorts of question: is it possible for conjuncture to involve an “existentiell modification” of the kind that could transform inauthentic into authentic participation in a MMOG?\textsuperscript{181} Is it possible for these pragmatic shared environments to give rise to situations in which individuals are able to take proper ownership of their own way of Being? Can authenticity arise from out of the creative repetition of fallenness and thrownness that became apparent in chapter 8?

Attempting to assess whether or not authenticity is possible within some particular phenomenal region, however, is (even in Being and Time itself) a notoriously difficult project – one that is, in this particular context, made all the more difficult by being brought into contact with concepts (such as conjuncture and the sense of creative repetition introduced in chapter 9) that are still largely “untested”; and one of whose functions has actually been to push on the boundaries of how traditional phenomenological notions are themselves understood and applied. With that having been said, however, the phenomenological framework that I have been provisionally following also provides one route towards addressing these sorts of question via an existential-ontological analysis of death. Let me explain.

In Being and Time, authenticity is first discovered to be possible for Dasein through the existential-ontological analysis of death carried out in division 2, chapter 1.\textsuperscript{182} For Heidegger,

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item This way of stating the suggestion is meant to allude to the connections Heidegger draws between existence and dwelling / inhabiting and the uncanniness of inauthentic existence. See Heidegger, Being and Time, 80 and §57.
\item I am using the phrase “existentiell modification” as Heidegger does on Being and Time p.168 when he writes ‘Authentic Being-one’s-self does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from das Man; it is rather an existentiell modification of das Man – of das Man as an essential existentiale’.
\item To be more exact at the risk of being obtuse, it is through this existential-ontological analysis of death that authenticity is first discovered to be ontologically possible for Dasein. See Being and Time, p.311. Although Heidegger’s phrase “ontologically possible” is not entirely perspicuous, I believe that what he means by this is that authenticity is shown via analysis of death to be something that is (to use language that Heidegger would likely not prefer) formally possible for a being whose way of Being is Being-in-the-world (i.e. which is formally possible for a being with this particular ontological constitution). The main function of the expression “ontological possibility” in Heidegger’s text is to indicate that the analysis of death carried out in Being and Time does not itself establish that
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
what ultimately makes it possible for Dasein to achieve a mode of Being-in-the-world that has been “released from the illusions of das Man” is Dasein’s ability to relate to its own Being-towards-death in a very specific way. While the details of this particular manner of relating to its own end will be discussed in detail on p.180 ff., the basic point to be made here is that, according to Heidegger, insofar as Dasein anticipates death as a possibility that is in part constitutive of its own existence, it is able to recognize that death is a fundamentally individualizing phenomenon that draws into question, not just this or that possibility, but the possibility of Dasein’s Being-there at all. In turn, this recognition is said to reveal to Dasein that its own existence is something that cannot be adequately defined in terms appropriate merely to “everyone and no one in particular”. Existence, rather, is something that is continually at stake not for “one in general” but for each Dasein itself. In this sense, the possibility of becoming genuinely aware of itself as a finite, mortal being, is held to ground the possibility that Dasein can, in turn, confront a life that has been oriented chiefly by idle-talk, ambiguity, and curiosity; and recognize that these deficient modes of existence ultimately fail to take proper account of the ways in which nullity in part defines the human way of Being. As Heidegger writes in Being and Time,

> When, by anticipation, one becomes free for one’s own death, one is liberated from one’s lostness in those possibilities which may accidentally thrust themselves upon one; and one is liberated in such a way that for the first time one can authentically understand and choose among the factical possibilities lying ahead of that possibility which is not to be outstripped.  

authenticity is actually realizable for Dasein, but only that it is genuinely possible given the nature of Dasein’s existence. It is not until analysis of resoluteness that Heidegger discovers an existentiell condition which attests to Dasein’s ability to actually realize authenticity.

183 Heidegger, Being and Time, 311.

184 Heidegger, Being and Time, 308.
What does this brief introduction to one of the main themes of division 2 of *Being and Time* have to do with “the death(s) of an avatar”? In my view, the connection between death and authenticity established in *Being and Time* provides at least preliminary grounds for thinking that understanding how something-like-a-death is encountered by those participating in MMOGs may have a significant impact on our ability to determine whether or not some kind of authenticity is also possible within these sorts of pragmatic shared environment. Understanding “the death(s) of an avatar” may make it possible to reformulate the issue of authenticity and MMOGs in a way that makes the issue itself more perspicuous. With reference to the sorts of question outlined on p.177, for example, it is possible to imagine the following kinds of reformulation: are MMOGs – places in which participants are continually required to deal with “an avatar’s death(s)” – regions which make it possible for Dasein to appropriately deal with the possibility of not-being-there which in part defines its own existence? Is it possible for someone to anticipate “the death(s) of an avatar” in such a way so as to also ground the possibility of their own authentic Being? Is it possible for “the death(s) of an avatar” to uncover the existential-ontological limitations of fallenness and thrownness to someone participating in a MMOG?

The third reason I have for focusing on “the death(s) of an avatar”, then, is that there is more is at stake in understanding this particular phenomenon than may at first be apparent. Clarity into issues such as the seeming inauthenticity of MMOGs, the possibility of an existentiell modification in which authenticity becomes genuinely possible, and the relationship between this particular kind of pragmatic shared environment and the authenticity of Dasein may be gained by focusing on “the death(s) of an avatar”. The extent to which this turns out to actually be the case is discussed towards the end of this chapter.

**II – Outline of the Argument**

Due to the complexity of this chapter’s main argument, I want to explicitly outline the argument which follows.

As indicated previously, something-like-a-death is commonly experienced by those participating in MMOGs. What I will argue in the following section is that this something-like-a-death is in fact *virtual death* – which is to say, death, understood in an existential-ontological sense as Being-towards-death, coming to presence virtually, where the virtuality of this phenomenon is conceived in terms of creative ontological repetition. As should be clear from
what I said earlier regarding this concept of virtuality, this argument will not show that the something-like-a-death experienced by those participating in MMOGs is the same as, or equivalent to, or similar to, Being-towards-death as traditionally conceived. However, it will show that, while these two phenomena are profoundly different, the concept of virtuality introduced in chapter 9 is a powerful enough qualifier to make death, in the sense of Being-towards-death, a feasible way of conceptualizing one of the ways in which it is possible for participation in a MMOG to end.\(^\text{185}\)

In order to make the argument which will follow, I will begin by discussing in more detail the main themes of Heidegger’s existential-ontological analysis of death. It is again important to note that this discussion is not intended to provide a thorough account of Heidegger’s conception of death, but only to introduce it in a way that will facilitate the analysis of MMOGs which follows. Next, I will provide three reasons for thinking that the something-like-a-death that is commonly experienced by those participating in MMOGs creatively repeats the ontology of Being-towards-death. In essence, this argument will amount to establishing that “the death(s) of an avatar” is a phenomenon that is ontologically continuous but different than / ontologically different but continuous with that “ownmost […], non-relational, certain and as such indefinite and not to be outstripped” possibility that in part defines Dasein so long as it exists: the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there.\(^\text{186}\)

III – Virtual Death

For a phenomenon to be virtual in my sense requires there to be a combination of ontological continuity and ontological difference with a particular aspect of human existence. In order to draw out such features in the case of death – and thus to understand what virtual death might be – it is necessary to recall three particular aspects of Heidegger’s existential-ontological

\(^\text{185}\) I write that “an avatar’s death(s)” is one of the ways in which it is possible for participation in a MMOG to end because, in addition to the possibility of an end grounded in Dasein’s own Being-towards-death (i.e. by “actually dying”), there is also the possibility of an end to participation in these places brought about by, say, a network disconnection or a system crash. Because these latter ways of ending are (interestingly, I think) not experienced by those participating in MMOGs as something-like-a-death (although they in part ground the possibility of this phenomenon or, as would more commonly be said, although they can “lead to” it), I will not discuss them in this dissertation.

\(^\text{186}\) Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 303.
interpretation of death as Being-towards-death. Each of these comes to fore in *Being and Time* in the passages where Heidegger writes,

Death is a possibility of Being which Dasein itself has to take over in every case. With death, Dasein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. This is a possibility in which the issue is nothing less than Dasein’s Being-in-the-world. Its death is the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there [Nicht-mehr-dasein-könnens]. If Dasein stands before itself as this possibility, it has been fully assigned to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. When it stands before itself in this way, all its relations to any other Dasein have been undone. This ownmost, non-relational possibility is at the same time the uttermost one.

As potentiality-for-Being, Dasein cannot outstrip the possibility of death. Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein.\(^{187}\)

The first aspect of Heidegger’s interpretation of death that comes to the fore here is his commitment to treating death as a *possibility* of Dasein. Understood from an existential-ontological point of view, this means that death is to be regarded as something that impends for Dasein, rather than as something that happens to Dasein “only” at the end of its life. It means that death is to be understood as a phenomenon that is outstanding for Dasein so long as Dasein exists at all, and is not to be conceived as an event that is initially distant, that gradually comes closer, and then that actually happens when life comes to an end.

The second aspect that comes to the fore here is Heidegger’s claim that Being-towards-death has to do with nothing less than the ontological status of Dasein as *Dasein qua a world-disclosing being*. For Heidegger, death signifies a possibility of Being-in-the-world that

\(^{187}\) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 294. Although I have maintained consistency with the rest of this dissertation by referring to the Macquarrie and Robinson translation here, I think that Stambaugh’s translation of this passage (which is only one paragraph in German) is slightly more settled. See p.232 of Stambaugh’s translation and p.250-251 of the 8th German edition.
“threatens” Being-in-the-world itself with the possibility of not being able to have anything to do any more with its own way of Being. Death, Heidegger writes, “signifies a peculiar possibility-of-Being in which the very Being of one’s own Dasein is an issue”.\(^{188}\) What is ultimately at stake in the possible end of Dasein that impends insofar as Dasein is, then, is not Dasein’s ability to disclose this or that particular situation, nor is it Dasein’s ability to enter into this or that collective pragmatic activity. It is, rather, Dasein’s ability to disclose a world within which such situations, pragmatic activities, and others (both Dasein and non-Dasein) can even come to presence for Dasein. Death is, in this sense, the possibility of the complete end of Dasein’s world-disclosing (at least of the sense of world-disclosing which occupies Heidegger in *Being and Time*).\(^{189}\)

The third aspect that comes to the fore in the passages quoted on p. 181 has to do with how Dasein comports itself, qua a world-disclosing being, towards this “peculiar” possibility that impends, so long as Dasein is, of not being a world-discloser any longer. Does Dasein “stand before itself as this possibility” (ibid) – which is to say, does Dasein take genuine ownership of this possibility as something that impends for itself – or does Dasein not “fully assign” (ibid) itself to this possibility, and rather allow death to be covered over and concealed by, for example, the publicness, idle-talk, ambiguity, and curiosity which predominate everyday existence? Does Dasein accept death as what individualizes at an existential-ontological level – in this sense, “undoes its relations with others” (ibid) – or does Dasein primarily evade death and “flee in the face of death” by permitting this phenomenon to be encountered only within the framework of fallenness governed by das Man? For Heidegger, it is both the kind of possibility that death is, as well as the way in which Dasein deals with this possibility that matter for existential-ontological analysis of this particular possibility.

My claim, then, is that what is commonly experienced by those participating in MMOGs as something-like-a-death is ontologically continuous but different than / ontologically different but continuous with Being-towards-death, and thus can be interpreted as virtual death (in the

\(^{188}\) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 284.

\(^{189}\) I bracket this caveat here because even while Heidegger claims that his analysis of Being-towards-death leaves open the possibility of some kind of other-worldly disclosing (say, as a “soul” in some kind of “afterlife”), his analysis itself arguably overrules such possibilities in tone if not in word. See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 292.
sense of virtuality I have proposed). In the following three sub-sections, I will provide three reasons in support of this claim.

III.a

First, I claim that what is commonly experienced by those participating in MMOGs as something-like-a-death creatively repeats Being-towards-death in part because what is at stake in this former phenomenon is the possibility of a cessation of an entity within-a-world — but, more than that, the possibility of an end of world-disclosure; but of the kind of world-disclosure made possible by conjuncture rather than of that world-disclosing which is constitutive of Dasein alone. Let me explain.

Recall that, according to the concept of conjuncture introduced in chapter 7, Dasein and avatars conjoin at an existential-ontological level in order to disclose a horizon of meaningful assignments or references within which beings can be encountered as situated or placed in the ways in which they tend to be in Dasein’s everyday participations in a MMOG. Analysis of something-like-a-death, therefore, has to account for the existential intimacy of conjuncture which makes it possible (or so I have argued) for there to be the kind of “there” that Dasein takes MMOGs to be: namely, places in the sense of shared, organizing, orienting, enabling, and constraining regions that tend to impose meaning on the everyday pragmatic activities of those participating in MMOGs. In order to account for this existential intimacy, analysis of something-like-a-death has to regard avatars as at once disclosed and disclosing; de-severed and de-severing; directed and directional; revealed and revealing; and, correspondingly, also has to regard Dasein as a way of Being whose essential ability to disclose world can be influenced at an existential-ontological level by something which Dasein itself discloses within an environment.

With that being said, consider first the kind of possibility involved in what is commonly experienced by those participating in MMOGs as something-like-a-death. On one hand, this possibility impends for an avatar, understood as a being that Dasein can encounter in the course of everyday existence. Something-like-a-death is possible for it. This possibility is what makes it possible for an avatar to “actually” something-like-die by, for example, falling into lava or drowning or taking too much damage from combat. This is what is meant by referring to something-like-a-death as “the possibility of a cessation of an entity within-a-world” (ibid). It refers to the possibility of an avatar discontinuing or coming to an end.
In addition to this, what is commonly experienced by those participating in MMOGs as something-like-a-death is also a possibility that impends for Dasein. In this regard, however, that which impends is not the cessation of an entity within-a-world, but the possibility of Dasein having access to a particular pragmatic shared environment within which it can, for example, encounter an avatar as an entity that can itself come to an end. In this respect, the possibility that impends in something-like-a-death is the possibility of no longer being open to a particular horizon of meaningful assignments or references. What impends is the possibility of no longer being able to be there – where the “there” in question is that which is revealed by way of the co-constitutive disclosure of Dasein and avatars. This is what I mean by referring to something-like-a-death as “the possibility of an end of world-disclosure” (ibid). What impends in the case of this phenomenon is the possibility of there being an end of a there for Dasein. The possibility of an avatar discontinuing is at once the possibility of an end of being open to a world – it is the possibility of no longer being able to participate and deal with entities and others in the collective pragmatic ways that are constitutive for the kinds of environment MMOGs have appeared to be.

With respect to this second characteristic of something-like-a-death, however, it is also necessary to consider the kind of end of world-disclosing which impends for Dasein in this phenomenon. Clearly, it is not simply the end of the same world-disclosing which impends for Dasein in the case of its own Being-towards-death. In the case of what is commonly experienced by those participating in MMOGs as something-like-a-death, even while what impends is the possibility of an end of a place within which situations, pragmatic activities, and others can come to presence for Dasein as placed, it is not the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there at all which impends for Dasein in this phenomenon. Dasein’s Being-towards-death is, in this regard, ultimately more of an issue for Dasein: for even while something-like-a-death is the possibility of the end of there being a there for Dasein, it is not Dasein’s worldly constitution as a whole which is here at stake. The possibility of Being-towards-death impends irrespective of something-like-a-death, even while the latter echoes it as the end of a certain type of world-disclosing possibility (namely, the one brought about by the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars).

Let me attempt to illustrate the preceding considerations through reference to the discussion of place carried out in chapter 7. Broadly speaking, when “an avatar dies” it can legitimately be said that something has happened, taken place, or occurred at some place within a MMOG. For example, suppose that someone’s avatar takes too much damage while running
across the bridge from Stormpike to Dun Baldar keep. When this avatar dies, something has ceased somewhere. An event will have taken place at some discernible location: on the bridge rather than at the keep itself and not in the chasm below the bridge that leads to the Irondeep Mine. When “an avatar dies”, something has ceased somewhere. The possibility which impends for an avatar insofar as it is an inner-worldly being that can something-like-die is the possibility of this kind of coming to an end.

But, more than this, when “an avatar dies” what happens is that this particular location also ceases to be a vicinity within which it is possible for Dasein to encounter others and equipment in the myriad, meaningful spatial arrangements in which they tend to be organized in everyday experience while participating in this MMOG. The spatiality of this location – the remoteness, nearness, placement, and orientation of entities and others within-this-world – in effect collapses – not because Dasein itself has ceased to have circumspective concerns that orient everyday pragmatic activity; and not because Dasein has itself ceased to be qua a being that composes, divides, organizes, and lays-out space, but because that which in part enables the composition, division, organization, and layout of this particular environment has itself ceased to disclose. That with which Dasein creates spaces for a particular host of shared pragmatic activities to come to presence stops enabling Dasein to de-sever and direct this particular place. “Here” there is nothing which counts as near enough to use or too far away to activate, for example, because that which in part allows equipment to be encountered by Dasein in these sort of spatial configurations has itself come to an end. Insofar as it is conceived as a possibility, then, something-like-a-death is at once the possibility of the end of a certain type of entity, and the possibility of an end of the kind of world-disclosure made possible by conjuncture: the possibility of the end of the placement, organization, and orientation of situations within which objects and others can be encountered as they typically are while participating in a MMOG. The possibility of this end is not the possibility of the end of Dasein’s ability to disclose space in general; but it is the possibility of the end of being co-constituted by an avatar, and hence of the end of there being a there for Dasein. Something-like-a-death is a possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there, has at stake a certain manner of being situated, and yet still does not directly duplicate or simply extend Being-towards-death. It is, in this regard, a creative repetition of Being-towards-death.
III.b

Second, I also claim that what is commonly experienced by those participating in MMOGs as something-like-a-death creatively repeats Being-towards-death in part because this phenomenon – even while it is a possibility that cuts Dasein off from its relationships with others, and is in this sense non-relational [unbezügliche] – is not an unsurpassable [unüberholbare] possibility.\(^\text{190}\)

There are three basic regards in which this is so.

When the co-constitutive disclosure of world made possible by the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars ends, so too does Dasein’s ability to participate in the pragmatic shared environment disclosed. It is no longer possible to, for example, move about with others in the world in question, conduct trades, use items of equipment, gesture or motion towards others, pursue collective ends such as the completion of group tasks, help others, etc. And yet, whereas Being-towards-death is a possibility that “when Dasein exists, it is already thrown into”, something-like-a-death is a possibility that impends only subsequent to Dasein’s existence, or which comes to be possible in the course of existence, and – even then – is not a possibility that impends for every Dasein in virtue of simply existing.\(^\text{191}\)

There are those for whom this particular way of ending will never be a possibility (i.e. those who never participate in any MMOG). And those for whom this possibility does actually impend become subject to this possibility as a result of projects which they have chosen while existing, rather than as a consequence of simply Being-in-the-world. As such, even while the possibility of this particular kind of end of world-disclosure “threatens” the relationships with others that are in part constitutive of the pragmatic shared environments MMOGs appear to be, this possibility of ending is not unsurpassable in the phenomenological sense which defines Being-towards-death.

Second, whereas Being-towards-death is also defined by Heidegger as unsurpassable in the sense of being the possibility of the final end of Dasein, the end which impends in something-like-a-death in each case need not be a final end. Whether or not the end which impends in something-like-a-death is the final end of a certain kind of world-disclosure is

\(^{190}\) Macquarrie and Robinson translate “unüberholbare” as “not to be outstripped” (p.294), whereas Stambaugh translates it “not to be bypassed” (p.232). I prefer the more conversational “unsurpassable”.

\(^{191}\) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 295.
contingent: it may or may not be depending upon factors such as, for example, the decision of the one for whom this possibility impends, and the continued availability of the MMOG to be disclosed through the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars. While something-like-a-death impends as a possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there, it does not impend as what Heidegger would refer to as the “absolute impossibility” of being-able-to-be-there because there may be the possibility of re-disclosing a world wherein the possibility of this kind of end once again impends. Stated somewhat roughly, even while “death happens” in a MMOG, experiences need not have come to a final end: whether or not any particular end is the last end which is possible is, in some cases a decision that one can make for one’s self, in some cases a decision that is made by others, and in some cases a consequence of, for example, elements such as the population or even the economic viability of the world in question.  

One has died; but now one respawn and can continue.  

Something has ended, but not everything. Something-like-a-death impends as a non-absolute end of world-disclosure – it is in this sense not unüberholbare.

Third, something-like-a-death is not unsurpassable because it is not only a possible end of world-disclosure, it is also a possible means of facilitating further world-disclosure that likewise has this manner of ending as a possibility. In this sense, something-like-a-death may permit the “becoming possible” of possibilities which were not possible at the time when ending impended in a particular way. Even as it impends as a possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there, something-like-a-death may also impend as the possibility of being-there in an altered context. So, for example, suppose one commits suicide in a MMOG in order to eventually respawn closer to a group’s intended destination. In this case, something-like-a-death impends not just as a possible end of being situated in a particular place, it also impends as the possibility of renewing relationships with others and equipment at a different location within the pragmatic shared

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192 So, for example, one can imagine a MMOG which is not profitable and which will shut down completely after every avatar perishes “one last time”. In this case, the end which impends in something-like-a-death will, as a matter of fact, be final – but, even then, this finality is not ontologically constitutive of the phenomenon in question, but only brought about as a consequence of factors which could have been otherwise.

193 “Respawning” refers to once again gaining access to the full range of possibilities open in a MMOG after dying. In World of Warcraft, for example, after one dies one becomes a ghost. If one’s ghost is not resurrected by another player, one “respawns” after a time at the closest graveyard in order to continue playing.

194 This is a technique which is actually used in some MMOGs, and which is generally considered an “exploit” or an unintended and detrimental appropriation of some feature of the world in question.
environment in question. Here, something-like-a-death impends both as a possibility of an end and as a possible means to an end: a manner of enabling one to continue carrying out circumspective concerns for which ending also impends precisely by way of temporarily closing down the co-constitutive disclosure of world whose end is made possible in something-like-a-death.

III.c

The third reason I have for claiming that what is commonly experienced by those participating in MMOGs as something-like-a-death creatively repeats Being-towards-death refers not to the kind of possibility that something-like-a-death is, but how those experiencing this phenomenon tend to comport themselves towards it. This third reason thus relates to the third aspect of Heidegger’s existential-ontological interpretation of death outlined on p.182.

Here, what is most evident is that something-like-a-death is typically regarded by those participating in MMOGs merely as an event – which is to say, merely as something that happens, occurs, or takes place within a world – and not as a possibility that impends ontologically as a possible end of world-disclosure (even as it is regarded as an event which takes place in a MMOG, rather than in “the” (real) world). In this respect, what is apparent first is how the common attitude towards something-like-a-death creatively repeats Heidegger’s conception of the average everyday understanding of Being-towards-death: namely, by taking this phenomenon to be something that happens often but is fairly unpredictable, and which is common and yet still “really matters”. Broadly speaking, those participating in MMOGs also tend to take something-like-a-death to be a constantly occurring event – one that everyone will inevitably have to deal with sooner or later (and, hopefully, later rather than sooner), one that is ambiguous with respect to the particularities of exactly how and when it will happen, one that is assumed to be familiar to those participating in such worlds, one that should not interrupt one’s everyday activities, and one that is nonetheless significant (but which is most significant when it has just happened or is likely just about to happen). In this respect, what Heidegger has to say about Being-towards-death on p.296 of Being and Time is also attested by the common attitude in MMOGs towards something-like-a-death:
In the publicness with which we are with one another in our everyday manner, death is ‘known’ as a mishap which is constantly occurring – as a ‘case of death’. Someone or other ‘dies’, be he neighbour or stranger. People who are no acquaintances of ours are ‘dying’ daily and hourly. ‘Death’ is encountered as a well-known event occurring within-the-world. As such it remains in the inconspicuousness characteristic of what is encountered in an everyday fashion. Das Man has already stowed away an interpretation for this event. It talks of it in a ‘fugitive’ manner, either expressly or else in a way which is mostly inhibited, as if to say, “One of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us”.

In MMOGs, something-like-a-death is regarded as an event that involves and concerns those participating in these places, but which does not concern them in such a way so as to reach the ontological impact of this phenomenon as a continually impending possible end of world-disclosure. Here, to put it somewhat flat-footedly, the nature of the phenomenon in question is circumscribed to its outward manifestation. What something-like-a-death is is defined in terms of what happens, rather than in terms of what the possibility of this happening means for the existential intimacy created by the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars.

IV

My view, then, is that the intensities and combinations of ontological continuities and ontological differences discussed in the preceding section provide sufficient grounds for interpreting what is commonly experienced by those participating in MMOGs as something-like-a-death as the creative repetition of Being-towards-death, and thus as virtual death in the sense of virtual proposed in chapter 9.

But what is actually at stake in the preceding argument? What is the significance of conceiving something-like-a-death as virtual death in the sense of a creative ontological repetition of Being-towards-death? Why go through the considerable effort required in order to ground the central claim of this chapter?
I want to begin answering these questions by returning to the issue of authenticity and MMOGs, assessed first from what I take to be a traditional phenomenological perspective. Recall that, on p. 179, I maintained that the connection between death and authenticity established in *Being and Time* provides at least preliminary grounds for holding that analyzing (what I will now refer to as) virtual death may have a significant impact on our ability to determine whether or not some kind of authenticity is possible in MMOGs. Not only does the preceding analysis of virtual death seem to substantiate this point of view, it seems to make possible a concise assessment of the relationship between authenticity and MMOGs: namely, that because those participating in MMOGs commonly regard virtual death as a certain, indefinite, familiar event that matters most when it actually happens or is likely about to happen, the attitude they have towards this phenomenon corresponds with the kind of inauthenticity discussed by Heidegger (for example, in § 51 of *Being and Time*) in relation to the common conception of Being-towards-death. Virtual death appears to be subject to a public manner of being regarded in which it is conceived, dealt with, and spoken about merely as an inner-worldly event, rather than as a possibility which has at issue someone’s ability to disclose a particular horizon of meaning within which objects and others can be encountered.

For this reason, I also believe that the preceding analysis of virtual death – once again, from a traditional phenomenological point of view – is likely to be taken to indicate that the inauthenticity that initially became apparent through analysis of fallenness, thronwness, and MMOGs is actually quite ingrained in the sorts of pragmatic shared environment here in question; that inauthenticity is likely as pervasive as the very pervasive “deaths of avatars”, and that the possibility of authenticity arising in MMOGs is correspondingly slim. To summarize these points in somewhat different terms, my intuition is that, assessed from a traditional phenomenological standpoint, the preceding analysis of virtual death is likely to be taken as further evidence that some kind of authenticity is, at best, a marginal and remote possibility while participating in a MMOG.

Now, on one hand, I myself believe that the view that I have expressed here on behalf of a traditional phenomenological standpoint make sense and are even well-grounded by the phenomena which provide the backbone of the preceding argument. In short, it makes sense from a phenomenological point of view to think that the common conception of “an avatar’s death(s)” is at once an expression of a certain kind of inauthenticity, and perhaps even a means through
which the everyday, inauthentic conception of death itself has been extended to cover activity in a relatively new domain of human experience. On the other hand, however, I think that what is actually at stake in the preceding argument is rather more than can be assessed from a traditional phenomenological point of view – and that this is so because virtual death introduces something that is unthinkable by traditional phenomenology.

Recall that, according to Heidegger, one of the primary strategies Dasein uses to cover and conceal the possibility of its own demise is by regarding death as an event that will happen at the end of life. What Heidegger hopes for Dasein to obtain from out of this sort of everyday conception is an authentic way of dealing with death, which he calls “anticipation” [Vorlaufen], in which Dasein accepts that death is not something that happens to it, but rather is a possibility that is in part constitutive of its own Being-there, one in which the end of Dasein’s ability-to-be-there itself impends.

In my view, the main argument of this chapter suggests that virtual death is both sufficiently ontologically continuous with Being-towards-death to re-iterate its core existential-ontological meaning as a possible end of Dasein’s world-disclosing ability; and sufficiently ontologically different than Being-towards-death to make death, as a possible end of Dasein’s world-disclosing ability, into something which can be experienced as such. In the case of virtual death, in other words, what I think we come into contact with is a phenomenon which, on one hand, does not directly impinge on one’s own Being-towards death, and which allows Being-towards-death simply to be as an impending possibility; while at the same time making it possible for Dasein to experience death as one’s own in the existential-ontological sense of being an end of one’s ability-to-be-there. It is in this regard that virtual death makes possible something unthinkable by traditional phenomenology: the within-the-world experience of an end of one’s own world-disclosing; or the actualization of a possibility that continues to impend as a possibility despite actualization as an event. Virtual death does not represent one’s own death to one’s self, nor is it a substitute for one’s own death, nor is it the death of another – it is at once a death of one’s own which can be experienced as such, and yet in which death continues to impend as a possible end of world-disclosure.
The suggestion I am trying to make here is a complicated one, so let me offer a second approach. According to Heidegger, regarding death as an event runs counter to its Being as a possibility; and in cases where death is taken to be an event that will happen, or which actually has happened, its nature as a possibility impending constitutively for Dasein is covered and concealed. As a creative repetition of Being-towards-death, however, virtual death manifests as a phenomenon which:

1. Is commonly *regarded* as an event;
2. Actually *is* an event that happens within-a-world;
3. Is an event that can be experienced as a possible end of world-disclosure; and,
4. Is an event where death continues to impend as a possible end of world-disclosure.

In this regard, unlike the kind of Being-towards-death available to Dasein alone, regarding virtual death as an event is commensurate with the Being of this phenomenon itself; and yet having virtual death be an event – which is to say, something that happens within-a-world – does not thereby prevent virtual death from being encountered *as* an end of one’s ability to “have” a world within which events, such as “an avatar’s death(s), can be experienced.

Here, the significance of virtual death may be further illustrated through reference to the opening passage of §47 of *Being and Time* where Heidegger maintains that,

> When Dasein reaches its wholeness in death, it simultaneously loses the Being of its “there”. By its transition to no-longer-Dasein, it gets lifted right out of the possibility of experiencing this transition and of understanding it as something experienced. Surely this sort of thing is denied to any particular Dasein in relation to itself.\(^{195}\)

What I am here claiming with respect to virtual death is that, by way of this phenomenon, it *does* become possible to simultaneously lose “thereness” in a particular kind of pragmatic

\(^{195}\) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 281.
shared environment, while at the same time being able to experience this loss as a transition that happens to one’s self, even as it permits one to continue being Dasein qua a being for whom the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there impends. In this, virtual death shares in the “eminent imminence” of death while also distancing Dasein from death in a way which does not sunder Dasein from this constitutive possibility, but rather allows Dasein to actually experience this – its death – as a possible end of world disclosure.196

The issue of authenticity and MMOGs – far from being concisely resolved through analysis of virtual death – has been opened-up in a new and substantial way. If the preceding suggestion is at all well-grounded, there are preliminary reasons for also thinking that what virtual death in fact facilitates is not “more inauthenticity” but a new way of Being-towards-death, a way of making Dasein better acquainted with death as something that can be its own as a possible end of world-disclosure. In other words, my view is that the main argument of this chapter provides initial grounds for thinking that, contrary to first appearances, the virtualization of death, or the creative repetition of ontological structures of death, may allow Dasein to itself experience a genuinely human way of dying: the always impending possibility of losing one’s ability to disclose a world.

To suggest that the virtualization of death may make possible a new way of Being-towards-death, of course, is far from claiming that this is “in fact” happening to those participating in MMOGs. Although I believe that I have shown how the groundwork for such an encounter might be forming, this is much less than is required to show how such an encounter would, or even does, actually come to pass. In order to establish these latter conclusions – at least within the phenomenological framework which I have been provisionally following – it would also be necessary to determine, for example, whether or not, how, to what extents, in what regards, and to what ends phenomena such as conscience, guilt, anxiety and resoluteness manifest in MMOGs. To state the point in not-quite-Heideggerian terms, to suggest how it is

196 Heidegger, Being and Time, 232. I cite the Stambaugh translation here because this phrase does not appear in the Macquarrie and Robinson translation. Instead, they translate the relevant sentence, on p.294, as “As such, death is something distinctively impending”. The German is “Als solche ist er ein ausgezeichneter Bevorstand” (Heidegger, Sein und Zeit, 250-251).
genuinely possible for such an experience of death to be had is far from showing that such a possibility is actually realizable in any particular concrete situation.¹⁹⁷

Based on this suggestion, I would like to conclude this chapter by making one further proposal concerning the “scope” of virtual phenomena in general. If there are initial grounds for thinking that virtual death may make possible a new way of Being-towards-death, then it follows that the virtuality of this phenomenon may not be localized to what goes on in a MMOG even while it originates from participation in this sort of pragmatic shared environment. In other words, it seems that the creative repetition of Being-towards-death may have an ontological impact which carries beyond the actual site where the virtualization of death is first and foremost apparent. If virtual death can be taken as a representative for the virtual in general, then there are (very) early grounds for thinking that the existential-ontological structure of MMOGs may itself impact the ontology of Being-in-the-world, even while this structure creatively repeats aspects of this way of Being. Put somewhat more formally, the proposal I would like to make here is that the kind of virtuality which has become apparent in this chapter provides some reason to think that that which creatively repeats transforms not only that which arises through the repetition, but through the repetition transforms that which is repeated. Virtualization itself may be productive. The combinations and intensities of ontological continuities and ontological differences which manifest as a phenomenon creatively repeats may accomplish something not possible for the phenomenon in its “original” form.

¹⁹⁷ In effect, this is my way of expressing a less boisterous form of the conclusion which Heidegger reaches at the end of his own analysis of Being-towards-death. There, he writes, “Nevertheless, this existentially ‘possible’ Being-towards-death remains, from the existentiell point of view, a fantastical exaction. The fact that an authentic potentiality-for-being-a-whole is ontologically possible for Dasein, signifies nothing, so long as a corresponding ontical potentiality-for-Being has not been demonstrated”. See Heidegger, Being and Time, 311. See also fn. 180 on p.177 of this dissertation.
11 Virtual Death and Temporality

In the analysis of virtual death conducted in chapter 10, what was not explicitly attended to is that virtual death is a temporal phenomenon. What do I mean by this? Not that virtual death, insofar as it is possible as an event that happens within-a-world, is possible as an event that happens “in time”; and not that virtual death, as a phenomenon that is not unsurpassable, impends as the possibility of temporarily no-longer-being-able-to-be-there; but that virtual death is a phenomenon that discloses time in the sense of making time available as something to be reckoned with.

In this chapter, I continue my analysis of MMOGs, first, by describing the manner in which virtual death discloses time as something to be reckoned with; and, second, by discussing that I think would be said about this manner of time-reckoning from a traditional phenomenological point of view. I then provide my own analysis of the temporality of virtual death, and I conclude this chapter by discussing what I think is at stake in understanding virtual death as a temporal phenomenon. Ultimately, I argue that the kind of movement evident in the concept of virtuality introduced in chapter 9 is made possible by the ecstatic-horizontal constitution of temporality.

We need to have a death penalty of some sort, otherwise death itself becomes meaningless." 198

One of the underlying suppositions of MMOGs in general is that what I am referring to as virtual death ought to be a primarily negative experience. In order to ensure that this is the case, and because virtual death is not an unsurpassable phenomenon (i.e. because this phenomenon is a possible, rather than an absolute, end of world-disclosure), the something-like-a-death commonly experienced by those participating in MMOGs typically brings about some kind of unfavorable or deleterious condition commonly referred to as a death penalty. Although death penalties vary

in nature and severity in different MMOGs, some common forms of death penalty include, for example, suffering a loss of experience points or XP; having one’s equipment and goods degrade and eventually become inoperable; having one’s skills and abilities temporarily impeded; and re-spawning within the world in question at a place inconveniently distant from where one died.\textsuperscript{199}

Due to the preponderance of some kind of death penalty, virtual death has a tendency to disclose time primarily as periods of time required for carrying out a particular task or tasks. This particular manner of having to reckon with time is most often expressed in the form of attending to how long something which has itself been brought about by virtual death will take. Typically, for example, this kind of concern is expressed in questions – sometimes actually articulated, and sometimes simply assumed among a particular collective – such as “how long do I have to wait before respawning?”, “how long will it take me to travel from a graveyard back to where I died?”, “how long will it take me to get my experience points back?”, “how long will it take me to pay for repairs?”, “how long can I survive before dying again?”, and “how long do I have to wait before impediments to my abilities wear off”\textsuperscript{200}.

Described in traditional existential-ontological terms, the type of concern evident here suggests that virtual death discloses time primarily as something quantifiable – which is to say, as something capable of being measured. Sometimes what is commonly experienced by those participating in MMOGs as something-like-a-death overtly discloses time as something quantifiable. For example, dying in Alterac Valley in World of Warcraft forces one to wait for a specific amount of time which is calculated based on the number of deaths occurring simultaneously in the same region. This “wait” is in turn counted down by a timer which appears as part of the user interface. When the timer expires, one automatically respawns and is able to continue participating.

\textsuperscript{199} The term “experience points” refers to an objective measure of the relative strength and weakness of different participants in a MMOG. One gains experience points typically by completing tasks and defeating enemies. The more tasks one has completed and the more enemies one has defeated, the more experience points one will tend to have. Gaining more experience points typically makes new skills and abilities (e.g. spells, charms, special moves, etc.) available.

\textsuperscript{200} Here, I am using language commensurate with how attending to time is usually expressed in this context. This is not to suggest that this language is not puzzling or problematic (for example, with respect to the use of “I” and “me” evident in such expressions).
In addition to this, sometimes virtual death more discretely discloses time as something quantifiable. This is the case, for example, when virtual death incurs some sort of economic penalty such as the cost of repairs for which it “takes X amount of time to pay for”; or when virtual death incurs a penalty to experience points for which it “takes X amount of time to recoup”; or when virtual death brings about some kind of geographical displacement for which it “takes X amount of time to return from”. In these respects (and in others besides), virtual death essentially has to do with time foremost in the mode of making time available as something to be measured.

Now, according to Heidegger, reckoning with time as something quantifiable – measuring time in the form of attempting to ascertain, for example, how long something will take or how much time remains to complete some task – makes time primarily accessible in terms of the present or “the now”, and thereby gives rise to a mode of understanding in which what are normally conceived as the two other dimensions of time are defined in relation to the present: the future as not-yet-present (or not-yet-now), and the past as no-longer-present (or no-longer-now). Although this view is one of the basic themes of Heidegger’s analysis of time in both Being and Time and The Basic Problems of Phenomenology, it also finds clear and synoptic expression in The Concept of Time where Heidegger writes,

All measuring of time means bringing time into the “how much”.
If I determine by the clock the point at which a future event will occur, then it is not the future that is meant; rather, what I determine is “how long” I now have to wait until the now intended. The time made accessible by a clock is regarded as present. If the attempt is made to derive from the time of nature what time is, then the now is the measure of past and future. Then time is already interpreted as present, past is interpreted as no-longer-present, future as indeterminate not-yet-present.201

As is well-known, Heidegger typically refers to the conception of time in which time is understood in terms of the present sometimes as “clock time” or “now-time”, but most often as

“the common understanding of time” or “the common prescientific understanding of time”.202 And, is also well-known, Heidegger takes the chief philosophical expression of this particular concept of time to be found in Aristotle’s *Physics*.203

For the purposes of this analysis of MMOGs, what is important to emphasize here is that Heidegger further claims that this common understanding of time, despite its profound history and significance, actually derives from a more fundamental conception of time that it covers and conceals – time understood in what Heidegger refers to as its “original” sense as temporality [Zeitlichkeit]: the “self-enclosed ecstatic-horizontal unity of future, past, and present”.204 For Heidegger, in other words, understanding time in terms of the present or the now – obtaining the kind of conception which he believes to be gained through treating time as something quantifiable – is actually an expression of Dasein’s *fallenness*. It is a symptom of Dasein’s propensity to understand itself, others, beings, and even time itself in ways that ultimately level (to use Heidegger’s expression) the fine-grained details of the phenomenon in question. Thus, for example, Heidegger writes on p.271 of *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*,

How does it happen that the common understanding of time knows time only as an irreversible sequence of nows […]? The covering up of the specific structural-moments of world-time, the covering up of their origination in temporality, and the covering up of temporality itself – all have their ground in that mode of Being of Dasein which we call fallenness.

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202 For example, see Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 257 where Heidegger writes “The common understanding of time comprehends only the time that reveals itself in counting as a succession of nows. From this understanding of time there arises the concept of time as a sequence of nows, which has been more particularly defined as a unidirectional irreversible sequence of nows one after the other”.

203 For example, see Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, 231, where Heidegger writes “Among the Scholastics, Thomas Aquinas and Suarez dealt most specifically with the time concept, in close connection with the Aristotelian conception. In modern philosophy the most important investigations of time occur in Leibniz, Kant, and Hegel, and here, too, at bottom, the Aristotelian conception of time breaks through everywhere”. See also the well-known footnote on *Being and Time*, p.484 in which Heidegger goes as far as claiming that “It can even be shown that [Hegel’s] conception of time has been drawn directly from the “physics” of Aristotle (footnote translated on p.500).

204 Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, 274.
Not surprisingly, to give an adequate and yet concise account of Heidegger’s conception of ecstatic-horizonal temporality (as well as to explain exactly why Heidegger believes that “the common understanding of time” is an expression of Dasein’s fallenness) is quite a difficult task. In my view, it is not obvious that Heidegger himself was entirely clear on the notion of temporality even as he assigned it a fundamental role in *Being and Time*. Nor is it clear that this notion remained constant through Heidegger’s initial attempts to work out the problematic of *Being and Time* in the lectures leading-up to the publication of that book, and in his attempts to complete the project of *Being and Time* in the lectures which followed in 1927. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, it is actually not necessary to begin by providing an account of temporality in the abstract. What is necessary, rather, is to discuss what is likely to be claimed about the particular way in which virtual death discloses time from the standpoint of Heidegger’s conceptions of now-time and original time.

Although the following view is, of course, speculative, there are grounds for holding that what a traditional phenomenological perspective would have to say about the manner in which virtual death discloses time is this: namely, that in facilitating a manner of time-reckoning which makes time accessible primarily as something capable of being measured, virtual death itself contributes to the concealment of ecstatic-horizonal temporality. Insofar as virtual death discloses time as something quantifiable – makes time available in terms such as *how much* and *how long* – there are grounds for holding that virtual death would itself be considered an expression of Dasein’s fallenness – a “technique” that ultimately impinges upon Dasein’s ability to understand time in what Heidegger takes to be its original sense, and which thus contributes to what Heidegger, on p.18E of *The Concept of Time* for example, refers to as the *homogenization* of time to the present.

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205 I have argued elsewhere that the lectures Heidegger delivered in Summer 1927 (translated as *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*) was Heidegger’s last and best attempt to complete the absent third division of Part 1 of *Being and Time* (the problem of “time and Being”) and thus to complete the project of *Being and Time* as initially conceived; but that this attempt failed because Heidegger was not able to sufficiently differentiate temporality [Zeitlichkeit], understood as the horizon for understanding Dasein’s Being, from Temporality [Temporality], understood as the horizon for Dasein’s understanding of Being in general. See Kevin Eldred, “The Fault of Being and Time” (B.Phil. diss., Oxford University, 1997).
In fact, this speculation can be taken further. Recall that, for Heidegger, fallenness is held to be one of the grounds of inauthentic Being-in-the-world. If virtual death discloses time in a way that accords with Heidegger’s conception of a fallen understanding, then it is viable to also suggest that virtual death helps ensconce a primarily inauthentic understanding of time itself. In this regard, we seem to once again receive further confirmation of the relationship between virtual death and inauthenticity which first became apparent in chapter 8. If virtual death assists in leveling the ecstatic structure of what Heidegger takes to be original time to the dimension of the present, then are grounds for thinking that this fallen understanding in turn facilitates a primarily inauthentic attitude towards the kind of time which is at issue in the collective pragmatic activity going on in MMOGs. Analysis of the way in which virtual death makes time available as something to be reckoned with once again suggests – at least at first glance – that inauthenticity is actually quite ingrained in the sorts of pragmatic shared environment here in question.

For reasons which I will endeavor to explain in the following section, however, the issue turns out, once again, not to be as straightforward as it initially seems.

II

Although I agree that virtual death discloses time as something quantifiable, I also believe that the manner of time-reckoning facilitated by virtual death does not contribute to the homogenization of time to the present, but actually involves dealing with time as a genuinely ecstatic phenomenon. As such, the claim that I will defend in this section is that virtual death does not bar access to temporality, but is rather capable of revealing the ecstatic-horizontal unity of time as a basis of shared pragmatic activity in a MMOG. Once I have established grounds for holding this view, I will explain what I take the significance of this position to be.

To begin at the broadest level, consider what is required in order for the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars to experience any particular kind of death penalty as an actual privation brought about specifically by virtual death. In order for this kind of penalty to be experienced as a genuine loss or negation “the death(s) of an avatar” has to adversely effect at least some of the concerns which someone participating in a MMOG actually has, and which they continue to take into account in some manner, despite having had these concerns, for example, prevented, interrupted, or otherwise impeded by virtual death. If there were no such concerns to prevent,
interrupt, or otherwise impede in the first place; or if such concerns were simply jettisoned the moment “an avatar perished”, it is difficult to see how virtual death could be a phenomenon that really matters to those participating in a MMOG – one which, as is the case in everyday experience, those participating usually go out of their way to avoid, and generally look-upon as something harmful, damaging, or deleterious.

What does being capable of experiencing virtual death as something that really matters mean with respect to time? In broad terms, it means being open to a past which comes to bear in the form of possibilities which may be untouched, which may be circumscribed differently, or which may be no longer possible due to one’s virtual death. It also means having a future come to bear through the projection of possible ways in which to respond to the continuities, alterations, and destructions brought about by this surpassable way of ending. And it also means being subject to a present in which one has to deal with whatever is taken to be of concern with respect to the possibility of virtual death.

To answer the preceding question in more overtly phenomenological terms, being capable of having virtual death really matter means being capable of reckoning with time in a deeper sense than was intimated by the discussion on p. 196. It means orienting collective pragmatic activities according to how time makes allowances for them. In this sense, reckoning with time does not mean merely counting the moments that come and go; nor does it mean merely taking time into account in some manner; nor does it mean assigning a time to one’s pragmatic conduct (e.g. “first I’ll do this, and then that, and then…”). Rather, it means working out what it is that time allows someone participating in a MMOG to, for example, recall, expect, plan for, take in, think about, speak of, or do in a particular situation. It means, as Heidegger writes, “taking our reckoning in accordance with it” – heeding time or being answerable to time as one conducts oneself in the kind of pragmatic shared environments here in question.206

This somewhat formal argument can be made more concrete by reconsidering the two kinds of case discussed on p.196 – 197 as illustrations of how virtual death discloses time as something quantifiable. Closer observation of the kinds of measurement brought about by virtual death indicate that reckoning with time in each of these cases does not involve treating time in

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206 Heidegger, Basic Problems, 258.
terms of the present alone, but rather guiding one’s activities within a pragmatic shared environment according to how time makes allowances for them.

With respect to the first case, consider what someone participating in a MMOG actually attends to while watching the timer that counts down the amount of time they have to wait before respawning in a place such as Alterac Valley. In this case, what they attend to first and foremost is not the passing of the moments that they wait, nor is it any particular moment in that succession. It is, rather, the possibilities which await them upon their return to the world in question, and which they in turn await while watching the timer count down – possibilities which may have been altered or even eliminated as a result of having died at some particular moment and at some particular place within the world in question. Here, calculating “how long” one has to wait before respawning chiefly involves, for example, gauging whether or not there will still be time enough to carry out this or that particular goal; assessing whether or not one will still have the time required in order to accomplish whatever it is that concerns them; working out whether or not, how, and to what extents, the projects that one had when one died may be impacted by the collective pragmatic activities of others which continue unabated even as one waits.

Rather than leveling time to the present, virtual death directs those participating in a MMOG back towards whatever it was that they were doing at the “time of death”, attends them to a future in which they expect this or that to be the case, and submits them to a present which makes both the past and the future more urgent precisely by preventing them from becoming present. This is the sort of time-reckoning that is attested to by the questions which commonly arise while observing such a timer count down: “What is going on in the world while I am stuck here waiting?” “Did our assault on Dun Baldur succeed?” “Will I get back in time to aid my allies in any useful way?” “How much longer do I have to wait?” Here, virtual death does not force one to take account of the present alone, it rather demands one take time into account as that which makes it possible for a particular array of expectations, retentions, plans, hopes, fears and uncertainties to bear at any particular moment in a MMOG.

With respect to the second kind of case discussed on p. 196 – 197, consider what someone participating in a MMOG actually takes into account when calculating “how long” it will take to, for example, gain back experience points lost because of virtual death. This
measurement of time cannot be achieved without, for example, gauging the time that it will take in order to find a place suitable for gaining experience; assessing whether or not the projects one had when one virtually died are likely to still succeed given the loss of experience suffered; and attempting to ascertain whether or not, and to what extent, one’s current circumstances may have been altered by this loss of experience. Here, measuring time in terms of “how long” depends upon orienting one’s own collective pragmatic activities according to the ways in which time makes allowances for the projects with which one is concerned. This does not mean leveling time to the present, but working out how the possibilities one has at present are configured, how these possibilities may be reconfigured by what will be possible in the future, and how the options one has, and might still have, may have been effected by what happened in virtual death.

This sort of time-reckoning is once again attested to by the questions which commonly arise while trying to determine, for example, “how long” it will take to regain XP: “Is it still possible to continue doing what I was doing when I died, or is it now simply too difficult for me?”, “Would it be more efficient to return to where I gained experience before?”, “What of my friends – are they higher level than me now?”, “Will they be able to help me gain back experience more effectively than if I was solo?”, “Am I still able to use the equipment I had before dying, or do I now have to search for other equipment before I can even begin to gain back the experience points lost?”. Reckoning with time even in the quantifiable manner under consideration here means being subject to time as that which opens up and constrains the myriad ways in which one can orient activity in response to virtual death.

The claim that I am attempting to substantiate in this section can be re-formulated using more traditional Heideggerian language. Broadly speaking, my claim is that closer observation of the kind attention brought about by virtual death indicates that this phenomenon discloses time not in terms of the present alone, but as something significant, shared, and dateable, and thus should be understood as a disclosure of what Heidegger refers to as world-time [Welt-zeit] rather than of what he conceives as now-time.
First, recall that, for Heidegger, the term “significance” refers to the interlocked arrays of relationships in terms of which Dasein makes sense of itself and others (both Dasein and non-Dasein) in everyday experience. How does virtual death disclose time as something significant? By requiring those participating in a MMOG to reckon with time as that which in part determines the meaning of the projects with which they are concerned. In orienting collective pragmatic activity according to the ways in which time permits, virtual death discloses time as something that partly establishes and configures the interlocked arrays of meaningful relationships that characterize the pragmatic shared environments here in question. In virtual death, for example, time is made available as something that partly determines what it is for something to make sense to do, and not do, in a particular situation. Suppose that, while observing the timer count down in Alterac Valley, someone predicts that they will not have enough time to get back and defend Dun Baldur keep from the invasion that virtually killed them some moments ago. This calculation of time in part establishes the meaning of whatever it is that they actually do upon respawning. Perhaps they make what they take to be a futile rush back to Dun Baldur, all the while expecting the worst. Perhaps they simply give up and “accept fate”. Perhaps they give up only to realize in retrospect that they could have done more than they did—and suffer through related ignominy at the hands of their allies. The way in which these possibilities (and others, of course) manifest to someone participating in a MMOG are in part due to how time manifests as something to be reckoned with; something that helps make sense of the particular situation in which someone finds themselves.

Likewise, virtual death exhibits the sharedness of world-time in disclosing time as something that is of collective account for those participating in a MMOG. Reckoning with time as that which in part determines the meaning of the projects with which one is concerned involves having this time count for the others with whom one’s own projects are inextricably bound up, just as it means being taken into account as one of many for whom this time is significant. In virtual death, time is disclosed as shared—something which orients as an aggregate the concerns of an indeterminate, unspecifiable plurality from which individuals for the most part do not stand apart. The sharedness of the time disclosed in virtual death can once again be made evident through example of the kind of calculation that often attends virtual death.

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207 Significance was discussed originally on p.94.
Suppose that one is attempting to measure “how long” it will take to gain back experience points lost as a result of dying. This kind of calculation necessarily involves considering how the others with whom one shares the environment also reckon with the time that collectively orients conduct. These others have to be taken into account as others it is, for example, possible to come into conflict with as a result of “arriving at the same resources at the same time”; possible to be impeded by because these others are “already underway” on projects that suddenly concern oneself; possible to be aided by through the collective re-orientation of tasks with the aim of “hastening” one’s own recovery. In these sorts of way (and myriad others, of course), the time disclosed through virtual death exhibits the manner of Being-with-one-another characteristic of world understood in an existential-ontological sense.

Finally, virtual death discloses time as something dateable in disclosing time as something that those participating in a MMOG tend to find intelligible in terms of events which would normally be said to take place “in” time. In virtual death, time is made available as that which can be dated according to the collective happenings – sometimes mundane, sometimes notable, sometimes outrageous – which matter in some way or another (and not necessarily in the same way) to a particular individual or group. To paraphrase the summary that Heidegger provides on p.262 of *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*: what those participating in a MMOG commonly regard as “now” tends to be taken as that which is happening now (“now that my group is dead . . .”); what they commonly regard as “in the future” tends to be taken as that which will happen at some point (“once our cleric respawns . . .”); and what they commonly regard as “past” tends to be taken as what which did happen or was happening on some occasion (“when The Sleeper died . . .”). To provide a mundane example, what is often of first and foremost concern when it comes to virtually dying is what was happening at the time of death, whether or not there is anything particular about that event that is worth retaining, and whether or not what is retained can be usefully applied to some situation in the future. In this common way, virtual death is assigned a purpose which comes to be intelligible primarily in terms of the events that reckoning with time makes possible: what, if anything, did someone learn from virtually dying on that occasion that might help them and the others with whom they are involved when such-and-such next occurs? In this regard, the significance of the time that is taken into collective account is primarily conceived in terms of events which took place at some point “in” time, and might still take place “in” the future. Once again, the underlying point here
is that the time which is reckoned with in virtual death does not involve isolating time to the present, but taking account of time as something spanning the collective worldly activities of which one is a part while participating in a MMOG.

III

In the preceding section, then, I have argued that reckoning with time in the case of virtual death involves guiding one’s activities within a MMOG according to how time makes allowances for them. Stated in more traditional Heideggerian terms, this argument amounts to the idea that the time disclosed in virtual death exhibits structural characteristics of world-time: namely, significance, sharedness, and dateability. But what is actually at stake in this argument? Why reinterpret virtual death as a temporal phenomenon? In what follows, I will focus on two considerations in particular.

III.a – Quantifiable Temporality

First, I believe that the preceding argument provides grounds for thinking that – contrary to initial appearances – the manner in which time is disclosed in virtual death does not accord with Heidegger’s conception of a fallen understanding of time in which time is homogenized to the present. What rather appears to be the case is that the way in which time orients shared pragmatic activity in virtual death is as a genuinely ecstatic phenomenon, even as it is primarily treated as something quantifiable. In this, phenomenological analysis of the temporality of virtual death puts pressure on the way in which temporality itself is conceived in the phenomenological tradition that provisionally orients the preceding analysis.

For Heidegger, the quantification of time is basically akin to its homogenization to the now: measuring time in terms of “how much” or “how long” is at once the chief source and the main symptom of reckoning with time as something purely present. What I think the case of virtual death attests to, however, is a quite different phenomenon: namely, one in which time is constantly reckoned with in the form of “how long” or “how much”, and yet in which time still manifests in its worldly character despite, or perhaps even because, of this very quantifiability. In the case of virtual death, in other words, what becomes evident is a manner of time-reckoning which is at once indicative of what Heidegger would call “the common understanding of time”, and yet which does not show signs of leveling time to the now.
The preceding point can be stated in somewhat different terms. Heidegger sometimes refers to “world-time” as “expressed time”.\textsuperscript{208} The reason for this is because Heidegger conceives of world-time as an expression of what he refers to as primordial temporality [ursprüngliche Zeitlichkeit] – which is to say, a manner in which what he conceives as the ecstatic-horizontal unity of past, present, and future becomes available to everyday understanding in its ecstatic-horizontal structure (as opposed to, say, in the inauthentic form of the present alone). In dealing with time as something that is significant, public, and dateable, in other words, Heidegger believes that Dasein comes into contact with time in what he thinks of as its original sense, rather than in what he conceives as its derived sense of now-time.

What I believe analysis of virtual death shows, however, is that it is possible to measure time in the form of “how long” or “how much” without evacuating the worldly character from this manner of time-reckoning. In the case of virtual death, it is possible to measure time and yet reckon with time as something that spans past, present, and future; as something that grounds the significance of everyday concerns; as something that is shared by an indiscernible many; and as something that is dateable in terms of the shared pragmatic activities taking place within-a-world. The quantification of time does not necessarily mean its homogenization to the present. The existential-ontological structure of what Heidegger would refer to as original time is maintained by virtuality as I have conceived it, not collapsed into the present.

In addition, it follows from this view that the relationship between virtual death and authenticity cannot simply accord with the traditional phenomenological perspective outlined on p.200. If my claim that virtual death discloses world-time rather than now-time is well grounded, then it is not clear that virtual death does indeed ensconce a primarily inauthentic relationship with time. Not only is there no further confirmation of the relationship between virtual death and inauthenticity which seemed at first apparent; there are preliminary grounds for holding that, in making possible an everyday mode of understanding in which those participating in a MMOG reckon with time as something significant, shared, and dateable, virtual death \textit{may} make it possible to gain an understanding of something like authentic temporality. Once again, I am not actually claiming that this is happening – that those participating in MMOGs do obtain an

\textsuperscript{208} See, for example, Heidegger, \textit{Basic Problems}, 261-264.
authentic awareness of temporality by way of virtuality – but only that there are reasons for thinking that the groundwork for such an encounter might be laid by phenomena such as virtual death.

### III.b – Transcending Transcendence

In order to explain the second, and further reaching, significance of the argument defended in this chapter, it is necessary to first revisit, at least at a high level, Heidegger’s conception of temporality. Stated in broad terms, one of the underlying goals of Heidegger’s account of temporality is to supplant what he takes to be conceptions of time in which time is understood as something basically static (say, something that embraces beings, or something which can be counted by way of the motion of things held to be “in” time (e.g. the “hands” of an [analog] clock)) with an understanding of time that is ek-static rather than static. In the sense in which Heidegger uses the term (which he in turn recalls from the Greek “έκστατικόν”), to refer to temporality as something ekstatic is to indicate that temporality itself is outside-itself – or, as Heidegger writes, it is to indicate that “within itself, original time is outside itself; that is the nature of its temporalizing. It is this outside-itself itself”. What this means – once again, in broad terms – is that what it is to be temporal is to be constituted by the movement of being carried-away. Temporality is time understood as that which is constitutively outside of itself. It is that which does not cease being what it is when outside itself, but that which only obtains the character that it has in virtue of being out-standing. Temporality does not leave itself behind when it is outside itself, but rather only is itself in virtue of this movement. Nor is there anything towards which temporality “goes over” insofar as it is outside-itself, nor is there anything apart from temporality “from which” or “in comparison to” temporality stands out insofar as it is constituted by the movement of being carried-away. For Heidegger, rather, time understood in what he takes to be its original or primordial sense just is the activity of this ekstatic movement.

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209 Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, 267. See also Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 377 where Heidegger writes “[…] temporality manifests as the ἕκστατικόν pure and simple. Temporality is the primordial ‘outside-of-itself’ in and for itself”.
According to Heidegger, moreover, it is ultimately the ekstatic character of temporality which makes possible or grounds the Being of Dasein. As Heidegger writes on p.267 of *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, for example,

> The term “ecstatic” has nothing to do with ecstatic states of mind and the like. The common Greek expression “έκστατικόν” means stepping-outside-self. It is affiliated with the term “existence”. It is with this ecstatic character that we interpret existence, which, when viewed ontologically, is the original unity of being-outside-self that comes-towards-self, comes-back-to-self, and enpresents. In its ecstatic character, temporality is the condition of the constitution of Dasein’s being.  

Although Heidegger attempts to elucidate the temporal ground of Dasein’s Being in a number of different ways (for example, by focusing on the temporal character of understanding), for the purposes of this dissertation, I want to focus on the connection Heidegger forges between the ekstatic character of temporality and what he refers to in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* as Dasein’s *transcendence*.

As has already been discussed, according to Heidegger’s existential-ontological interpretation, world is the lived environment with which Dasein is familiar insofar as it exists, and wherein Dasein conducts itself in primarily pragmatic ways alongside others with whom the environment is shared. For Heidegger, moreover, because world in this existential-ontological sense cannot be conceived as a phenomenon independent of Dasein, but is essentially bound-up with Dasein’s existence, Dasein itself has to be conceived as Being-in-the-world. In the sense in which Heidegger uses the term in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, the worldly character of Dasein’s existence further licenses thinking of Dasein as a being that is “*truly transcendent*”.  

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210 The last sentence quoted here (which is the focus of the following discussion) is often repeated. See, for example, Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, 274 where Heidegger writes “Temporality is the condition of the possibility of the constitution of Dasein’s Being”.

Being is *out beyond itself*.\(^{212}\) Recalling what he takes to be the original meaning of the root “transcendere” (to step over), Heidegger’s basic contention is that, in being constituted by a world that it shares with beings both of and unlike its own way of Being, Dasein needs to be conceived as that which *is itself* only by over-stepping “to” the world that is in part constitutive of its own Being. Here, “transcendent” means the opposite of *other-worldly* – it means being worldly in the way of Dasein. And here “transcendent” is not used to refer to that “towards which” something steps over – it rather refers to the process of actually being *that which over-steps*. To state the point somewhat summarily, according to Heidegger, what it is to be Dasein is to be constituted by the movement of transcendence: “Because Dasein is constituted by Being-in-the-world”, Heidegger writes, “it is a being which in its Being is *out beyond itself*”.\(^{213}\)

One way to parse what Heidegger means by identifying temporality as the ground of Dasein’s Being, then, is that the integral over-stepping which is constitutive of Being-in-the-world is in turn *animated* or *put in motion* by the ek-static constitution of temporality. How does original time make possible Dasein’s transcendence? By providing the movement necessary for this way of Being to be out beyond itself, in a world, among other Dasein likewise transcending. In other words, the underlying idea here is that what allows Dasein to step over itself to world, and, in so doing, to exist as Being-in-the-world is the constitutive outside-itself-ness of time understood as an ekstatic phenomenon.

What does this account of the relationship between temporality and transcendence suggest with respect to virtual death in particular? First, it suggests that insofar as virtual death discloses world-time rather than now-time, there are grounds for interpreting this phenomenon as an expression of ecstatic-horizontal temporality. It suggests, in other words, that insofar as virtual death does not homogenize time to the present, it is legitimate to interpret this phenomenon as one way in which the ecstatic-horizontal unity of past, present, and future becomes available to everyday understanding *in* its ecstatic-horizontal structure. More than this, however, this account also suggests that what makes it *possible* for virtual death to disclose time as something shared, public, and dateable is because this phenomenon is itself animated or put in motion by the

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\(^{212}\) Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, 299.

\(^{213}\) Heidegger, *Basic Problems*, 299.
movement of temporality. This account also suggests, in other words, that it is because virtual death is grounded by the out-standing nature of ekstatic temporality that it is possible for this phenomenon to disclose world-time rather than now-time.

Why are these two suggestions significant? What is at stake in conceiving the manner of time-reckoning brought about by virtual death as an expression of temporality that obtains this expressive character because it is animated or put in motion by the movement of what Heidegger conceives as original time? Let me explain.

If it is possible to take virtual death to be representative of virtuality in general (something I will do for the sake of the discussion which follows), the two preceding suggestions in turn provide tentative grounds for the following two proposals: first, that the kind of movement evident in the creative repetition of ontological structures of human existence is actually integral to existence itself; and, second, that this so because the kind of movement evident in this sort of creative repetition is grounded by the ekstatic nature of temporality.

This first proposal has to do with the nature of virtuality as I have conceived it. Not only is virtuality in the relevant sense not opposed to reality or to actuality – there are tentative grounds for also thinking that virtuality is not opposed to Dasein even as it creatively repeats aspects of this way of Being, and therefore introduces some measure of ontological difference into the nature of Being-in-the-world. What rather seems to be the case, given the preceding account of the relationship between temporality and transcendence, is that virtuality is “one” with Dasein precisely in taking Dasein beyond itself by way of the movement of creative repetition. Virtuality and Dasein’s transcendence, in other words, appear to be at home with one another: transcendence is what allows Dasein to be itself by over-stepping to world; while virtuality allows Dasein to over-step everyday Being-in-the-world and so to be itself in ways that are ontologically continuous with, and yet ontologically different than, existence as traditionally conceived. Virtuality is what makes it possible for Dasein to transcend transcendence: to step over its usual over-stepping by making Being-in-the-world manifest in ways that are beyond Dasein alone, and that involve the kind of existential intimacy inaugurated by conjuncture.

The second proposal outlined above is that the kind of movement which takes place in virtuality – the power for something to be what it is by introducing a gap or distance or difference within itself that does not sunder it from what it has been and will be – is animated or
put in motion by the ecstatic-horizontal unity of present, past, and future. According to Heidegger, Dasein transcends because it is temporal. What I am proposing here is that the overstepping of ontological structures of human existence brought about by their creative repetition does not disrupt the temporal ground of existence, but rather appears to be an expression of this selfsame power. Virtuality is a way in which time makes it possible for Dasein to step beyond Being-in-the-world. Or, to express the same point in somewhat different terms, the proposal here is that the ontological continuities and ontological differences characteristic of virtuality in the relevant sense are themselves given force by a temporal continuum that underwrites human existence: not a static extent in which no portion is distinct from any other, but an ekstastic movement which both animates the over-stepping character of Dasein’s transcendence, and the stepping beyond existence brought about by the creative repetition of ontological structures of Being-in-the-world. Time in the sense of ecstatic-horizontal temporality is not virtual; but time is the ground of virtuality.

These two proposals can also be linked more explicitly back to the concept of virtuality I proposed in chapter 9. There, I suggested that MMOGs, as virtual worlds, could be interpreted both as a manifestation of a certain kind of exuberance or vitality – of the power of Being-in-the-world to exist by transforming itself – and as a particular engine of change through which creative repetition enables Being-in-the-world to be itself by stepping beyond itself. What I am proposing here is, first, that this vitality is ontologically continuous with the kind of power that Dasein already manifests in over-stepping “to” the world that is in part constitutive of its own Being; but also that this vitality is ontologically different in that it does not simply allow Dasein to over-step to itself, but to over-step its own over-stepping and hence to exist in ways that do not sunder Dasein from its own Being, and yet which also do not simply give Dasein back to itself in ways that are fundamentally unchanged. Existential intimacy with what is non-Dasein allows Dasein to transcend the limits of its own self-overcoming. In addition to this, I am also proposing that what drives the ontologically continuous / ontologically different nature of virtuality’s vitality is time understood as an ekstastic phenomenon. What allows virtuality to transcend transcendence – or, what allows transcendence to transcend in an ontologically continuous / ontologically different way – is the movement given creative repetition by the outside-itself-ness of original time. Virtuality is a “noble power” in virtue of being an affirmation of existence that transforms existence from within itself because of time.
12 Conclusion

Part 2 of this dissertation has developed some initial groundwork of a phenomenological analysis of MMOGs. Its method has been to bracket concepts typically applied in existing studies in order to induce concepts appropriate to this field from out of the analysis of certain phenomena, and to reflexively encourage these concepts to put pressure on the traditional phenomenological framework that gives them life. The result has been both to extend our understanding of a particular region of existence, and to bring us into contact with a number of broader issues that have substantial philosophical merit in their own regard.

Yet, a number of questions remain.

I – Relevance to Existing Studies of MMOGs

What exactly does the preceding analysis have to say to existing studies of MMOGs? Is it the intent of this analysis to suggest that those who have been studying MMOGs ought to focus (also? perhaps instead?) on phenomenology in order to better ground their own theories? Am I arguing that existential-ontology should be established as the basis for studying these kinds of computer game? Definitely not. Nevertheless, I do think that there are two particular and fundamentally positive lessons that authors of existing studies may want to take from the preceding analysis.

The first is that MMOGs can be treated with all of the seriousness, gravity, and intellectual rigour they deserve without being presumed simply to be real. Overcoming the legacy of common conceptions of virtual, and gaining insight into the activities going on in MMOGs, does not require positing that MMOGs are just as real as “the real world”, nor does it require holding that those participating in these games tend to take MMOGs to be real, at least for the purposes of their online activities and interactions. Rather, as illustrated in the analysis of Part 2, it is possible to suspend concerns about the reality or non-reality of MMOGs, and yet make headway into understanding some of the substantial continuities and substantial differences that underwrite the social, economic, emotional, and other investments people make in MMOGs. Gaining initial insight into the nature of MMOGs as locations of meaningful, effectual, shared, human conduct does not require settling on whether or not MMOGs are real, only appear to be
real, or are real only in effect. This is not to say that questions about the reality or non-reality of MMOGs ought to be held in reserve indefinitely. Rather, I have argued that suspending such questions at the outset lends itself to developing a basis from which to consider such concerns, and allows us to see and treat them as appropriately higher-order.

A second lesson is that studies of MMOGs should not shy away from grappling with the concepts in terms of which these studies themselves are framed. There are two main reasons why this reflexive conceptual analysis is especially productive in the context of studying MMOGs.

First, as I believe Part 2 of this dissertation has shown, there is no reason to believe that grappling with the concepts that are used to approach the subject of MMOGs (rather than, for example, defining such concepts outright, or appealing to intuitive notions that may only seemingly be well understood) is ancillary to the actual study of these games. On the contrary, explicitly addressing the terms with reference to which MMOGs are analyzed (rather than unquestioningly analyzing them in those terms) is capable of giving rise to a more thorough conception of the subject in question. An example is provided by the notion of virtuality introduced in chapter 9. Rather than define it outright, or use it in an apparently commonsense way, the preceding analysis proposed an understanding of this concept that was based on a preliminary interpretation of certain phenomena that this concept in turn helped us better understand. In particular, by providing a systematic way of articulating some of the intensities and combinations of differences and continuities exhibited by MMOGs, this notion of virtuality made it possible to bring into focus the temporal basis of the kind of creative ontological repetition I have held to be at home in these computer games. By analogy, I believe that dealing thematically with the concepts that frame their own analyses of MMOGs – concepts such as representation, embodiment, imagination, computer-generated, and digital – will provide existing studies both a more well-defined approach to their respective areas of concern, and a deeper understanding of some of the claims that these studies have already made (claims such as, for example, that avatar-involving interactions are embodied, or that the worlds in which MMOGs take place are computer-generated).

The second reason why grappling with the concepts in terms of which the study of MMOGs is framed is even more important. As it has been a goal of this dissertation to demonstrate, explicitly dealing with such concepts in the context of an analysis of MMOGs
allows this particular subject to reflexively put pressure on the way in which these concepts themselves are understood. In this respect, dealing explicitly with concepts such as representation, embodiment, computer-generated, etc. while studying MMOGs may allow analysis of this particular subject to simultaneously deepen understanding of the concepts in terms of which such studies are framed. For example, attending more closely to the exact notions of reality applied in these studies may lead them to conclude that what they had initially taken to be real cannot be real in as simple or as straightforward a sense as had been assumed. Similarly, by dealing directly with concepts of the imagination, authors of existing studies may come to conclude – not that MMOGs are somehow both real and imaginary – but that what these studies themselves had taken to be the substantive differences between being real and being imaginary do not hold up under the pressure applied by MMOGs.

Broadly speaking, that is, there is no reason why the kind of conceptual reflexivity developed in Part 2 need be limited to an existential-ontological approach. Such reflexivity could provide existing studies means for contributing to discourses that at once address and transcend the issue of MMOGs in particular.

II – Relevance to Phenomenology

A second set of questions is also worth pursuing. How should we understand and position the analysis developed in Part 2 with respect to the phenomenological tradition? This analysis, of course, often focused on ways in which MMOGs unsettle traditional existential-ontological notions. Yet it is also true that a particular tradition of phenomenological thinking has been instrumental in guiding this analysis itself. This interplay can be traced throughout Part 2:

- The idea that MMOGs exhibit structural features of worldliness, and are therefore ontologically continuous with Dasein’s Being-in-the-world, is one of the cornerstones of the interpretation developed in this dissertation – an approach explicitly oriented by Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein. Interpreting MMOGs as worldly places, however, in turn put pressure on the traditional Heideggerian idea that there is a fundamental-ontological division between Dasein’s Being and the Being of entities non-Dasein. In order to account for how Dasein and avatars function together at an existential-ontological level, I therefore proposed the concept of *conjuncture* – a concept that in turn does not obey some of the other concepts and divisions posited by traditional phenomenology (such as, for example,
the idea that what appears to be within-the-world is disclosed within Dasein’s environment, but cannot contribute ontologically to the act of disclosing an environment itself).

- Interpreting MMOGs as worlds led to questioning how, to what extents, in what regards, and to what ends the phenomena of fallenness and thrownness contribute to the worldliness of these pragmatic shared environments. Here, observation suggested initially that conjuncture facilitates traditional modes of fallen existence. But it also suggested that, when Dasein and avatars function together at an existential-ontological level, certain aspects of Dasein’s thrownness are abated. This, however, also turned out not to be the whole story. Closer analysis of MMOGs further suggested that there are also new modes of fallenness enabled specifically by the conjuncture of Dasein and avatars, and that Dasein’s thrownness is abated by MMOGs only because these places are sites into which Dasein is, in certain regards, thrown. Thus, while the analysis of the phenomena of fallenness, thrownness, and MMOGs was oriented by traditional phenomenological conceptions, the boundaries of those very conceptions had to be redrawn in order to do justice to the phenomena at hand.

- My proposal to understand the virtuality of MMOGs in terms of the creative repetition of ontological structures of human existence was openly indebted to the notion of existence developed in existential-ontology. Yet I also introduced a notion of creative repetition that is outside of the traditional Heideggerian account of Dasein. Leveraging this notion of virtuality enabled us to gain insight into the phenomenon of virtual death, and in this respect once again allowed this study of MMOGs to interface with several of the main themes of traditional existential analysis: the nature and possibility of an “existentiell modification” that could transform inauthentic into authentic Being-in-the-world, and the ontological constitution of death understood as a possibility of Dasein. Once this analysis of virtual death was actually underway, however, it also became apparent that virtual death disclosed something unthinkable to traditional phenomenology – the within-the-world experience of an end of one’s own world-disclosing – and hence put pressure on the traditional phenomenological interpretation of death itself.
By focusing on the temporality of virtual death, the analysis was able to bring to light one manner in which the structural characteristics of world-time are exhibited in MMOGs. This analysis made it evident that time functions as more than a merely calculable phenomenon for those participating in these computer games, but it also drew into question the traditional phenomenological supposition that quantifying time contributes to the homogenization of time to the present. In addition, the proposed account of the temporality of virtual death provided the basis for a suggestion also not to be found within the boundaries of traditional existential-ontology: that virtuality allows Being-in-the-world to transcend in an ontologically continuous / ontologically different way and, in so doing, enables Dasein to overcome its own self-overcoming and be Dasein in a way that is beyond Dasein alone.

Assessed from the perspective of a set of traditional phenomenological propositions, the analysis of MMOGs developed in Part 2 does not closely adhere to its roots. The provision provided by “the letter” of the kind of existential-ontology that orients this analysis has unevenly waxed and waned as the analysis progressed. What I think is more decisive for phenomenology, however, rather than adhering to any such conceptual roots, is exactly the kind of interplay and conceptual reflexivity developed in Part 2. In my view, it is precisely because this analysis of MMOGs has become both “within and without” – has both drawn upon and put pressure on several phenomenological themes – that it counts as being genuinely phenomenological. In the sense that orients this dissertation, phenomenology has not been done away with – but this is so because phenomenology has neither been left behind nor simply left untouched.

III – Prospects for Further Investigation

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that the aim of the preceding analysis has not been to develop anything approaching a complete or exhaustive interpretation of MMOGs. Rather, this analysis has focused on a narrow range of phenomena within this region with the intention of providing at least some of the “pillars” upon which a more thoroughgoing analysis of MMOGs could be built. For this reason, it useful to conclude not by stopping or drawing this analysis to a close, but by outlining some of the ways in which the analysis that has been conducted might provide a foundation for a future, more extensive, and detailed phenomenological interpretation of MMOGs:
The concept of conjuncture I have introduced focuses on the co-constitutive role Dasein and avatars play in disclosing MMOGs as worlds. In my view, it would be useful to consider further how, to what extents, and in what senses this notion of conjuncture may or may not underwrite the “relationships” that people are sometimes said to form with avatars in the course of their everyday participations in a MMOG. For example, is it possible for someone to identify with their avatar(s)? Is it possible for someone to identify themselves as their avatar(s)? Are there other forms of identification that need to be considered with respect to MMOGs? Can someone fall in love with an avatar? Can someone come to hate an avatar? How, if at all, might the concept of conjuncture help us assess issues such as these?

The language that is used, among other things, to designate practices, name others, and describe certain events while participating in a MMOG was shown in Part 2 sometimes to exemplify characteristics of fallenness (such as idle talk). But this is only a small subset of the language-use evident in MMOGs. Are some of these other uses of language non-fallen? Are there things said or written while participating in MMOGs that could be interpreted as expressions of truth (understood in the phenomenological sense of the unconcealing / concealing movement of aletheia)? More broadly speaking, is an existential-ontological approach towards the study of MMOGs capable of providing adequate insight into these various forms of language? Consider, once again, a term such as “farming” and the mechanical form of repetitive, economically driven behaviour designated by this term. As mentioned in chapter 8, it is at least arguable that both this kind of conduct and the term used to designate it are expressions of a specifically Capitalist worldview. Would phenomenology therefore have to gain access to a Marxist form of critique in order to gain further insight into phenomena such as farming? If so, what would be the terms of such a rapprochement? Or would a Marxist approach supersede phenomenology in this sort of case?

I have argued that the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed are places understood in a sense that recalls Heidegger’s use of the term “Gegenden”. But the notion of place is certainly not static within Heidegger’s own philosophy. In particular, in later works such as “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”, Heidegger begins to conceive of Dasein’s inhabiting less in terms of familiarity with a shared environment, and more in terms of how
Dasein collectively cherishes, protects, preserves, cares for, and attends to the world around and about. Inhabiting comes to mean not just “being there”, but tending and attending to the site wherein disclosure happens; it comes to mean a type of dwelling that Heidegger ultimately (and [in]famously) interprets as a “primal oneness” between earth, sky, divinities and mortals that he refers to as “the fourfold”. To what extent could MMOGs be interpreted as places in this more existentially weighty sense? Are the locations of which MMOGs appear to be composed sites wherein Dasein dwells in the sense of shepherds and protects the fourfold? Does the notion of dwelling itself need to be reconsidered in order to do justice to the phenomena of MMOGS?

- The proposed analysis of MMOGs made no indication about the sense in which MMOGs may or may not be interpreted in terms of Heidegger’s conception of the essence of technology. Does understanding MMOGs as virtual worlds in the sense of the creative repetition of ontological structures of human existence lend itself to further analysis in terms of enframing? Does the conception of virtuality that I have proposed resist such treatment? Is the notion of enframing itself unsettled by interpreting MMOGs as virtual worlds?

- Neither the existential intimacy at the heart of the concept of conjuncture, nor the notion of creative ontological repetition at home in my conception of virtuality were defined exclusively in relation to a particular kind of technology. So how far do these concepts extend? Are there other beings with which Dasein conjoins in order to disclose world in an ontologically continuous but different way? Is Being-in-the-world home to other virtualities that allow Dasein to transcend the limits of everyday Being-in-the-world?

Lastly, and most generally, there is the question of the extent to which the analysis developed in Part 2 can or might or should affect the development of phenomenology above and beyond the specific site addressed in this dissertation. Even the questions outlined above continue to be framed first and foremost in terms of the analysis of MMOGs. For now, I leave unaddressed, at least in any explicit form, broader questions such as whether or not the explorations and considerations carried out here apply to sites that have little or nothing to do with contemporary digital computing technologies; and to what extent they may ultimately impinge upon the overarching project of phenomenology to understand the nature of our collective conduct in a shared world.
For now, I simply want to say that the underlying aim of this dissertation has been to establish MMOGs as a region of existence where the practice of phenomenology and the phenomena of MMOGs reflexively give rise to a philosophically rich conception of each other. I conceived and wrote this dissertation with a copy of Being and Time open on my desk, and a copy of World of Warcraft open on my desktop. There seems to me to be something not only right about that way of proceeding, but essential.
Bibliography


