

Chapter 20

“Virtual Reality” Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT

The term ‘virtual reality’ is used widely in contemporary culture to evoke the false worlds of the imagination digital technology has enabled us to create. However, the term itself remains ill defined, particularly amidst recent developments in theories of virtuality and reality that have left contradictory marks on VR. The phrase ‘virtual reality’ has become problematic, and is in need of a reconsideration for its continued relevance. This chapter assesses the term throughout its development and in the context of other theorisations such as cinema and cyberspace that have dominated recent digital theory. Taking the Deleuzian expansion of the Virtual and the Lacanian expansion of the Real, the chapter interrogates the constituent processes of VR to suggest a new mode of conceiving the technologies in terms of a parallax between virtual-real and physical-digital within contemporary thought, which will then be applied to a conceptual framework for digital creative practices.

INTRODUCTION

Within the many varied, and often incongruous, theories of digital technology and its culture there are two strands of the discussion that have emerged in which the very terms of the field are challenged. These are centred on the problematic notion of ‘virtual reality’ that has dominated cultural depictions of the digital world, usually taking either ‘virtual’ or ‘real’ in an expanded definition to draw out a deeper understanding of the fundamental differences, connections and interdependency between physical and digital spaces. Digital media has called into question the appearance of ‘reality’, forcing all theories of contemporary culture to take into account the possibility of other spaces with which the (physical) human subject can engage. There is a need to expand and intersect current discussions of the relation between virtual and real by exploring the antagonisms that arise through developing both sides of the term. This chapter will therefore readdress the term ‘virtual reality’ in the context of ongoing debates in philosophy, technology and creative practice in a discussion of subjectivity in contemporary digital society, to insist on a constant re-evaluation of the terms used in such a discussion and their ramifications for its application in digital media and creative technologies.

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The expansion of the term ‘virtual’ often takes into account the definition developed by Gilles Deleuze (2004a; 2004b) as a surface that is not actual but with which the subject can engage. This has been applied to digital media as an alternative to the conflation of ‘virtual’ as ‘digital’, as is implied in the labels ‘virtual reality’ or ‘virtual worlds’, to instead connect the fluidity of digital surfaces to consciousness in a relation consistent with other generative effects within the structures that form the idealist element in Deleuzian philosophy. Anna Munster (2006) emphasises the role of affect by placing the virtual as a part of the materiality of the digital. While this work and others take important steps towards establishing the problematic of embodiment, the focus on the materiality of the digital obscures its relation to consciousness and leads back into limited use of the term ‘real’. There is a clear Deleuzian influence in Munster’s work, and both Deleuze and Félix Guattari are referenced heavily in relation to the virtual, as well as notions of flow, diagram and time. Between the two expanded terms, however, there remains little crossover in current literature. Rob Shields (2003), Brian Massumi (2002) and Andrew Murphie (2002), for example, all utilise the Deleuzian virtual while persistently conflating it with the digital, and largely fail to mention the real outside of its direct and ‘common sense’ connotation of the physical.

How the individual relates to the plethora of potential realities available in contemporary society and its philosophies (physical, digital, social, semantic, oneiric) can be understood in redefining the term ‘real’ according to Lacan (1977), particularly as applied to cultural phenomena by Žižek (2008a). Writers such as David Gunkel (2010) have furthered this notion, drawing out the real across physical and digital worlds as the hidden causality (for example, quantum wave functions, DNA or bits of computer code) that underpins the appearance of objective reality. This real is inaccessible and terrifying, embedded within the psychoanalytical construct of contemporary subjectivity. Throughout the field, the antagonism between virtuality and reality persists as a theoretical pariah between physical and digital reality, media and creative processes. Žižek’s (2012) own discussion of the matter simply places Deleuze’s virtual as Lacan’s real. While acknowledging the importance of the reality of the virtual opposed to ‘virtual reality’, Žižek confuses the nuances of the two processes within consciousness and their functions in the generation of contemporary subjectivity, creativity and society. The antagonistic relation between the real and the virtual, in the expanded sense of both terms, will form an integral method of analysis throughout the chapter, and reconciling Žižekian and Deleuzian philosophies will provide an informative step towards understanding the relation between virtuality and reality.

This chapter will separate and explicate the two expanded terms, defining the Real as the presupposition governing the way reality ‘really’ appears to us and the virtual as the forces outside of actualisation that nevertheless impact upon reality. From this theoretical exposition, a discussion can be raised concerning the redefinition of our relation to digital technologies under such terms. Digital media in general and virtual reality in particular are commonly associated with processes of simulation. Indeed the phrase ‘computer simulation’ dominates the lexicon of many technological applications with a focus on representing the physical world within digital space. However, in the context of this expanded set of terms, the digital appears as a simulation-of-simulation. That is, where simulation is, according to Baudrillard (1994), an appearance with no link to reality, the appearance on the computer screen is precisely defined by the reality of computer code.

This turn – in which digital space can stake at least an equal claim to reality as the physical universe amidst the breakdown of material certainty seen in quantum physics, genetics and poststructuralist linguistics – enacts an ontological levelling between physical and digital worlds, and in particular their manner of appearance to human subjects. Both of these processes are present within physical and digital worlds, necessitating a separation of the virtual from the digital and the real from the physical, towards

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