

# Living Virtually or Virtually Living

- understanding virtual places through a reading of Heidegger's philosophy

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## Abstract

In this paper I discuss the concept of place and its relation to virtual reality. In doing this I present a reading of Martin Heidegger's later philosophy alongside a reading of Marc Augé's 1995 *Non-places*. I argue that virtual places can exist but that they are of a different kind than non-virtual places. Finally, I argue that there are inherent problems with such virtual places on an environmentalist view, pertaining to the alienation of the inhabitants from the non-virtual

## Introduction

I was afraid for all my life, right up until the day I knew my life was ending. and that was when I realized that ... as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also ... the only place that ... you can get a decent meal. Because, reality ... is real.

— James Donovan Halliday ('Ready Player One')

In the 2018 film 'Ready Player One' we meet James Halliday, the eccentric tech-geek and pop culture buff who invented the virtual reality gameworld called O.A.S.I.S.<sup>1</sup>, which is seemingly inhabited by everyone alive. It appears on the surface that everything is possible in the digital world – nevertheless everyone, even the creator of the world, must return. In this case, called there by the sound of a growling stomach.

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<sup>1</sup> Ontologically Anthropocentric Sensory Immersive Simulation.

This pop culture tale of the battle for the virtual realm tells us that there are certain problems when considering virtual reality environments – even ones as advanced as in the film – as places. In this paper I will address these problems and suggest how we might understand virtual places. I will do this by drawing on the thinking of Martin Heidegger and non-place-theory as presented by French anthropologist Marc Augé.

As such, I will be making three related points throughout this paper:

- 1) That Augé's non-place theory supports and augments the view of places as presented by Martin Heidegger, and can supply useful definitions for places, and
- 2) that on such a definition VR Environments (VR-Es) may be understood as what I call second-order places.
- 3) That such second-order places are problematic on an environmentalist view.

### **What is a place?**

In order to discuss whether there can be VR-E places we must first understand what it means to call something a place. Following Heidegger, we will start with his example of the bridge: "The bridge is a location. as such a thing, it allows a space into which earth and heaven, divinities and mortals are admitted" (Heidegger 1971: 153). To understand what this means, we must examine the four parts of the fourfold. **The earth** is "the serving bearer, blossoming and fruiting, spreading out in rock and water, rising up into plant and animal" (Heidegger 1971: 147). It is closely related to **the heaven**, which according to Heidegger is:

[...] the vaulting path of the sun, the course of the changing moon, the wandering glitter of the stars, the year's seasons and their changes, the light and dusk of day, the gloom and glow of night, the clemency and inclemency

of the weather, the drifting clouds and blue depth of the ether. (Heidegger 1971: 147).

Together these two constitute what we would normally refer to as nature, understood in the sense of that which is given to us and which is – at least without active intervention – out of our control. We did not create the earth that sustains us and all other life, nor do we command the drifting clouds or the rainfall. We might seek to or inadvertently affect it and we might react to it, but we are not ultimately the designers of our world.

**The mortals** are very simply put you and me. It refers to human beings and their "being with one another" (Heidegger 1971: 147f). Lastly, we have the more contended part of the fourfold, namely **the divinities**. In my reading I largely follow the interpretation of Julian Young, on which the divinities are a reappearance of the heroes of *Being and Time*. Understood in this way then, the divinities are rolemodels, whether historical, fictive, religious or mythological. I make this point of the possible non-religious nature of the divinities despite the religious language in which Heidegger expresses the idea, since it seems that the role which Heidegger had in mind for the divinities, although it might once have been monopolized by the religious, is no longer. As rolemodels, the divinities are embodiments of right-doing and as such also represent a normative expectation. (Young 2000: 198ff, 2011: 288f)

Once again, we see with this pair that the fourfold is characterized by what I will call a *givenness*. The fourfold is not something that we control or create, it is given to us – with the words of the earlier Heidegger one might say that we are thrown into it.

The bridge can "allow a site for the fourfold" and this is what constitutes a place (Heidegger 1971: 152). To make this idea clear Heidegger presents us with a Black Forest farmhouse:

Let us think for a while of a farmhouse in the black forest, which was built some two hundred years ago by the dwelling of peasants. Here the self-sufficiency of the power to let earth and heaven, divinities and mortals enter in simple oneness into things, ordered the house. It placed the farm on the wind-sheltered mountain slope looking south, among the meadows close to the spring. It gave it the wide overhanging shingle roof whose proper slope bears up under the burden of snow, and which, reaching deep down, shields the chambers against the storms of the long winter nights. It did not forget the altar corner behind the community table; it made room in its chamber for the hallowed places of childbed and the "tree of the dead"— for that is what they call a coffin there: the *totenbaum* — and in this way it designed for the different generations under one roof the character of their journey through time. (Heidegger 1971: 157).

What Heidegger here describes is a gathering of the fourfold. The prominent parts of this farmhouse have come to be in reference to the elements of the fourfold. The placement and roof-design gathers in the earth and sky, the altar corner, the community table, the childbed and the coffin gather in the mortals and divinities. Had the weather or the nature been different, the farmhouse would have too, and as such also the lives of those living in it. Had the customs required something other than an altar or a different placement of the coffin, this too would have changed the layout and lives of the farmhouse.

I have mentioned the givenness of the fourfold above. This notion is important, because it is characteristic of what Heidegger calls dwelling, a certain mode of being-in-the-world which involves letting the world freely disclose itself while not subjugating it to our will. It is also important because places for Heidegger seem to be dwelling-places. I will not go deep into the notion of dwelling, since a discussion of this is outside the scope of this paper (for more, see Heidegger 1971: 143-159). Suffice it to say, that the dwelling is closely connected to and problematized by the mode of *Gestell*, in which all is seen as malleable resource and ultimately even

humans themselves, reducing us to cogs in an impersonal rationale (Heidegger 2013: 19).

It may be taken as a trivial point, that the layout of our homes design our lives in a certain way but that is not all there is to places. Moreover, a respectful gathering of the fourfold, which does not subjugate it, makes room for a place in which solid identity can occur.

In the case of a subjugated gathering, ie. one that bends nature to our will, it presents an unboundedness, which does not make room for solid identity and life-design, for if we could freely design our lives this way, we could just as well design it another.

Heidegger is – although not explicitly – trying to define what a dwelling-place is and as such how to define a place that lets the world (Being) freely disclose itself. Given this it is obvious that not all things could be places in this rich sense – take for example many instances of the shopping mall; its construction requiring leveling of the natural landscape, its form paying no homage to the landscape it is placed in (which is perhaps also why many shopping malls feel very similar no matter where in the world they are) and with the only social interaction in mind of cashier-customer.

### **Places and Non-places**

Summarizing the above we find that places, or perhaps more precisely dwelling-places, are constituted by their gathering of the fourfold, ie. by their reference to and respect of nature and culture. At the same time a place is also productive and restrictive in the sense that it lays out for its inhabitants a certain way of living.

A more recent thinker in the same vein is the French anthropologist Marc Augé. In his book *Non-places*, first published in 1995, he discusses the idea of anthropological places and so-called non-places. In the introduction to the second edition of the book, he defines anthropological

places as "[...] any space in which inscriptions of the social bond [...] or collective history can be seen" (Augé 2008: VIII).

In greater detail, he defines places as spaces of identity, relations and history. Spaces can be 'of identity' in the sense that:

The layout of the house, the rules of residence, the zoning of the village, placement of altars, configuration of public open spaces, land distribution, correspond for every individual to a system of possibilities, prescriptions and interdicts whose content is both spatial and social. (Augé 2008: 43).

It can be relational insofar as certain rules of residence which assign an identity also thereby place a person in "[...] an overall configuration whose inscription on the soil he shares with others" (Augé 2008: 43). 'Relations' in this sense then should not necessarily (or at least not primarily) be understood in the everyday sense of having relations – friends, family, love-interests or otherwise. Rather it means that *places place us* in systematic relations to each other. This can encompass the social relations but certainly also more functional relations. Augé then is in agreement with Heidegger insofar as places are constitutive of identity and of the possibilities of one's life.

Places are then historical "[...] from the moment when – combining identity with relations – it is defined by a minimal stability" (Augé 2008: 44f). That is historical insofar as it has references to the recollections of events and individuals that have been experienced<sup>2</sup> or recorded customs and rites.

What is not mentioned in these definitions but rather only implied by Augé, is the importance of respected limits or boundaries in the sense that I have also discussed it above with regards to the given nature. He

considers throughout the book the importance of alterity, in the introduction stating that "[...] individual and collective identity is always constructed in relation to and in negotiation with otherness" (Augé 2008: IX), and the symbolic importance of frontiers (both physical and otherwise, e.g. language-barriers). For otherness to exist there must be a difference in identity between different places, yet construction following only technical ideals of effectiveness will most often not lead to such differences, since what is effective in one place is also effective in another if we can subjugate local conditions such as leveling grounds, removing forests and so forth. This is a situation in which "[...] to cross international borders brings no more profound variety than is found walking between theatres on Broadway or rides at Disneyland" (Augé 2008: XII). Augé identifies globalization as the tendency for growing worldwide similarity and the removal of otherness and distance— a point that clearly echoes Heidegger in his critique of technology (see for example the introduction to 'The Thing', Heidegger 1971: 163).

But what then is this thing called non-places? Obviously we are not to understand that this is some sort of non-existing entity in any physical or geometric sense. Non-places have extension (I use this term widely, as I also regard the virtual as having extension) just as well as places. Their difference lies not, so to speak, in their *räumliche* or mathematical-geometric features. Rather the difference is social-causal, in the sense that what matters in the determination is how it affects and creates identity and social possibilities for those interacting with it. This understanding also further shows why theories such as ANT are not directly opposed to this view, but rather that the place-non-place distinction serves to inform such a theory of different types of actors.

Augé offers the airport as an example of a non-place. There, we are reduced from persons to passengers and become "[...] no more than what [s]he does or experiences in the role of passenger" (Augé 2008: 83) and

the role of passenger, due to the setup of the airport, requires no knowledge of my personal identity – I am presented with “[...] the passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing” (ibid.) – and no relation between me and anyone else, except purely practical relations, which are for the most part maintained by signage (ie. where to go, what to do, etc.) The non-space “[...] creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude” (ibid.). I propose the understanding then, that the non-place is an instrument for use as opposed to the place which has agency in the sense that it affects and structures persons and their lives.

### **Place—Non—place Continuum**

A distinction has then been introduced between places, which bestow upon us identity, relations and historical anchoring, and non-places, which presents us with identity-loss and lack of structured relations. However this distinction is not absolute, in the sense that something must either be place or non-place.

The account presented by Augé is simply that “[...] some places [...] can be constituted in what for outsiders remains rather a non-place” and that “[...] the possibility of non-place is never absent from any place” (Augé 2008: VIII, 86). The same is true in Heidegger’s account. The Black Forest farmhouse might be an example of how a place was once constructed, however it “[...] in no way means that we should or could go back to building such houses; rather, it illustrates by a dwelling that has been how it was able to build” (Heidegger 1971: 158). The farmhouse was once a place but is no longer. If it were to be constructed in the exact same way today, it would most likely be regarded an artifact fit for a museum, since the gods of the altar corner are no longer (at least not as exclusively) our gods, the ways of human interaction not the same and so forth.

How are we to account for this fluid movement between place and non-place? Is the place/non-place question answered merely by reference to subjective experiencing? If that were the case, we could hardly build places for others nor set out to intentionally create non-places, except for ourselves.

According to Augé the difference is at least centrally explained by language, since it is "what weaves the tissue of habits, educates the gaze, informs the landscape" (Augé 2008: 87). We are in other words conditioned through language to experience the world in a certain way – the world presents itself to us differently. This I will call the laden-experience answer. Augé references Baudelaire and highlights the difference between merely seeing chimneys or seeing "masts of the city" (ibid.: 89). In Heideggerian terms, the world is never presented to us *as is* but rather in a specific mode of unconcealment. The essence of a thing should not, according to Søren Gosvig Olesen's reading of Heidegger, be considered a static truth but rather as *Ereignis*, an event or a certain way of disclosing (Olesen 2013: 128).

Considering the insights of behavioral design, it seems foolish to say, that the *setup* of our surroundings does not also *set us up* to seeing the world one way or the other. But cultures change both over time and (although increasingly little) over distance and so does the substantial content of the fourfold. As such, that which was once a place, may not be so forever and that which is a place for one person is not necessarily one for another.

Understanding places and non-places in this way makes room for the understanding of place–non-place as a continuum while not committing one to the claim that it is merely a matter of subjectivity. Rather, it is an interplay between object and subject.

### **The possibility of VR places**

In the previous sections I have tried to show the advantages of jointly considering the place-theories of Martin Heidegger and Marc Augé. I have argued, that there is an important overlap between the two and that Augé can help us understand Heidegger in more contemporary and less poetic terms, which will hopefully be helpful in the practical applications of the ideas Heidegger has to offer. At the same time, through his criticism of technology, Heidegger can inform us as to why we should worry about the existence of places or the domination of non-places in ways that Augé does not.

To summarize, I have argued that on this view, a *place* is understood as an area in which humankind is rooted within the world, connected to the past and to each other – where one can dwell, in Heidegger's terms and that this is achieved through building that takes into account local conditions and adjust to them, rather than try to overcome or control them and represent local traditions and norms in the process.

In order for something to constitute a place then, it must meet certain requirements: There must be a respect for geographical limitations, a live historical anchoring through monuments and practices and the creation of a social identity and a configuration of relations related to the space – or said with Heidegger, it must gather the fourfold of earth, heaven, mortals and divinities.

### **VR Places**

How does one then evaluate whether there can be *places* within VR-Es? I aim to show whether such places could occur on principle. As such, what one should look for in order to determine if VR-Es can be places is whether they can fulfill the necessary criteria, as stated above, for being perceived as places. I will go through each requirement individually, discussing its

possibility within virtual space and I will discuss them in order of descending clarity of answer.

### **Singular identity and relations / the mortals**

It seems a rather uncontroversial claim, that identities are formed in some relation to virtual environments whether it be video games or certain social media. However, as we saw above with the case of the airport, not all identities are singular identities, e.g. the anonymous identity of 'airport passenger', which assigns the individual to a certain class but does not constitute a singular identity. As such, group-identities e.g. as belonging to a certain fraction in a MMORPG<sup>3</sup> would not be enough to satisfy this requirement. But one might imagine a virtual simulation of any given existing non-virtual place. It seems implausible to claim, that the mere fact that it is now digitalized and accessed via a headmounted display or another form of technology makes it less constitutive of singular identity in the sense that Augé has described it. Therefore, the virtual in and of itself cannot rule out this possibility.

However, it does raise some interesting questions concerning the places of virtuality. Although the make-up of a town could be identically simulated on a computer and accessed, it would be different from the non-virtual exactly because it must be actively accessed and therefore can also be left again at our leisure. We do not actually choose to be born and we cannot merely resign from the non-virtual to a more basic reality.

This is however not a principled argument against the possibility of virtual places, but rather a contingent one. The film *The Matrix* has popularized the idea of a completely simulated reality in just this way, in which the inhabitants do not know that they are in a simulation and as such do not know of the weakened constraints of their environments. The possibility of such a situation – although we might not technologically be

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<sup>3</sup> Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game

able to achieve it currently – shows that it is not the virtual as such that accounts for the difference, but perhaps rather a certain epistemological condition; the knowledge that we are not (as) limited.

Concerning relations and the "configurations of positions" described by Augé (Augé 2008: 44), it seems as intuitive as with identity, that a non-virtual place could be digitally simulated and retain its relational characteristics. We might also look to various non-realistic virtual spaces such as Facebook, in which Facebook defines our identities in terms of friends, page-admins, followers and followed and we stand in relation to one another based on where we can 'go' and what we can do or how we are expected to act towards another (i.e. the follower-followed relation). As such we both receive identity within the place and are placed in relations to others by it. With Heidegger's farmhouse we are placed in relations based on the rooms we are allowed, our places at the table and so forth, and it seems the same may be true within a VR-E.

### **Historical anchoring / the gods**

At first thought a problem comes to mind regarding the virtual and the historical. Most who play videogames or those who have tried VR-experiences know that save-points, reloads and other time-distorting features are usual parts of many virtual worlds. It seems to problematize the possibility of historical virtual places, when you can start over at your convenience, because it counters the consolidation that is normally associated with history; although we might wish to in many cases, we cannot go back and redo history.

My response to this objection would be that there are many different forms of VR-entertainment. One form might be the well-known narratively driven single player game-form (e.g. the Batman Arkham trilogy, the single-player mode of the Call of Duty series or others) and this form does

indeed seem to fall on this objection, since it is hard to see how history can be established when it can always be revisited and remade.

However, that is not all there is to say about history and the virtual. The fact that one form of digital virtual experience cannot be historical in this sense, where history is created and consolidated throughout the user's interaction with the experience, does not mean that the virtual excludes history. We might have other forms of VR-Es which do not have these same features in which that which has been experienced really is then consolidated as history and where historical places could then exist.

We might also understand history in a different sense, in order to understand the possibility of places in VR-Es. Many fictional worlds upon which virtual worlds are based (e.g. Middle Earth, the world in which *The Lord of the Rings* takes place) have an expansive lore filled with tales, heroes, wars, cultural innovations and so on. Such a ready-made history could then be what a historical building or statue refers to, rather than the history made by the users. It might be objected then, that history is removed from the users, seeing that all history is created before and without them. However, this should not be considered as worrisome as it might seem, since many people alive today have not lived through what is considered history. If this were an objection to places in VR-Es, then it would also be an objection to places in general. As such, I do not believe that this objection rules out historic rootedness in a VR-E, although it may be conceded that at least the phenomenological experience of time might be different depending on the degree of immersiveness.

### **Limitation / earth and sky**

As I have laid out above, an important aspect of Heidegger's thinking on places focuses on limitation and respect of the given. In the same vein, I have argued that the anthropological approach of Augé also at least recognizes the importance of boundaries in the sense of demarcating

difference. This seems to be the point where the virtual is truly different to the non-virtual, since the virtual is necessarily constructed. Heidegger's earth and sky were given to us – which should not be mistaken for a theological claim but rather understood as the fact that we have not created existence for ourselves – but we have given the virtual world to ourselves. We, or at least the programmers and designers among us, create the virtual worlds for ourselves. It may then intuitively seem, that the virtual by its very nature does not respect limitation.

This objection mistakes the world's creation in its entirety for the creation of individual places within it. It holds, that since it is a prerequisite for *placeness* that it is created in respect for the given environment without reducing it to resource and that VR-Es are created by humans with no regards to any 'given', VR-Es cannot be places. This is mistaken in two related ways. Firstly, it mistakes 'world' for 'place'. The theory as I have presented it does not place importance on how the world came to be, only that it was not created by those who inhabit it, thereby opening the possibility of caring for the given – even the notion of 'given' suggests that at least it could be accepted that the world was created. In the virtual analogy then, it does not matter that the VR-E is created by a group of programmers, this would merely make them analogous to the God of the old testament; they are the givers of that which we are given.

Furthermore, the importance is not how what is came to be, but rather the way in which we interact with it and how we treat it, so even though the VR-E may be created to raise profits (by some game-company), this does not stop the users from respecting it as given. However, curiously, it does seem to stop or at least hinder the developers from experiencing places within their own VR-E, since it would not be given to them by themselves, insofar as they could always change it.

It may also be objected, that the digital nature of a VR-E is problematic, since this in some sense has already reduced it to malleable

resource, since the code can easily be rewritten and nothing is anything but a constellation of 1's and 0's. This again does not raise any concerns that could not be analogously raised against the non-virtual. There is nothing about the fact that everything is made up of different constellations of atoms, that requires any specific mode of being nor any specific way of interaction with the world. As such, we might be aware that everything can be treated as malleable resource but persist in treating it otherwise.

### **Second-order Places**

As I have tried to show above, it is possible for there to be *places* within a VR-E. However even after this affirmative discussion something may still irk the reader in this conclusion – because it seems intuitively, that such virtual places would be different in some important way to non-virtual places. I have been asked too, why it would even be necessary to uphold the idea, that there is a relatedness between the virtual place and the non-virtual. I hold that it is unfruitful to completely separate the two phenomena, since it seems that people tend to be able to have similar interactions with both, with regards to sociality, identity and so forth. We are also starting to see more examples of lives lived for the most part in the virtual without obvious ailments, which seems to suggest some level of interchangeability (See for example Baym 2015).

I will try to settle this uneasiness by drawing on Jeff Malpas' work on the non-autonomy of the virtual, and argue that these virtual places – although possible – are a different type than non-virtual places. They should be considered *second-order places*.

Finally, in this section, I will argue that a prevalence of such second-order places is not unproblematic. I will do this with a view to how it might affect the individual's relationship to one's basic sustaining environment. According to Malpas, the virtual is non-autonomous in two ways. It is:

- 1) causally non-autonomous, and
- 2) contentually non-autonomous.

It is causally non-autonomous in the sense that its existence is dependent on structures outside of the virtual realm, e.g. physical servers on which the virtual exists and also that our interaction with the virtual is made possible by non-virtual object, such as HMD's and controllers or mouse/keyboard and computer screen. It is contentually non-autonomous in the sense that "[...] the content that is embodied in the virtual is always dependent on the everyday world in which the virtual is embedded" (Malpas 2009: 135f). This is because we experience the virtual through certain "frames of significance", which we, according to Malpas, bring with us from the non-virtual. This latter type of non-autonomy seems less strong than the former, as Malpas seems to acknowledge himself, as he too brings up *The Matrix*, in which an individual's entire life is lived within the virtual, removing the need to view the world as different from the 'everyday' (Malpas 2009: 135ff).

First we must understand one important aspect of the virtual, namely the need to avoid so-called *immersion breaks*. According to the definitions of VR-Es given by David J. Chalmers they are "[...] an immersive, interactive, computer-generated environment". In this context 'immersive' is to be understood as generating "[...] perceptual experience of the environment from a perspective within it, giving the user the sense of 'presence'" (Chalmers 2017: 3). This immersion on a broad understanding is a way of maintaining the sustained investment in the VR-E. However immersion can be broken in cases when the user is made aware of the non-virtual reality. (Slater 2009 p. 3552, Grabarczyk and Pokropski 2016 p. 31) e.g. a HMD-user bumping into non-virtual elements such as furniture or walls, or hearing the noises of the cars on the road outside while in a

fantasy medieval-esque setting. It follows then that in order to maintain immersion, the VR-E must be designed to avoid such breaks in the form of reminders of the non-virtual.

So we have on the one hand a non-virtual world on which the virtual is causally dependent and a virtual world which in order to maintain itself must block out reminders of the existence of this more basic non-virtual world.

When considered using the terminology of the fourfold, the causal non-autonomy states that the virtual in fact relies on earth and sky. However, they lie outside of the domain of the virtual itself. In the case of a non-virtual place, we might then visualize the gathering of the fourfold around the center-place as in fig. 1.

In the case of the virtual place however, this seems to change, since the fourfold gathered cannot be the same as the non-virtual fourfold, since this would lead to immersion breaks<sup>4</sup>. So we might visualize the gathering of the virtual fourfold as in fig. 2, with the smaller innermost circle representing virtual counterparts to the non-virtual components of the fourfold; virtual heaven, earth, mortals and divinities. These counterparts

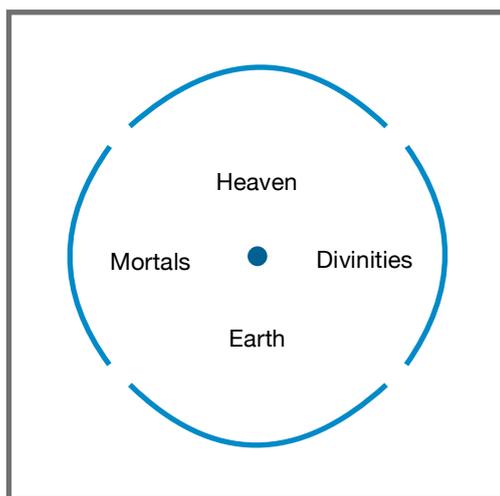


fig. 1

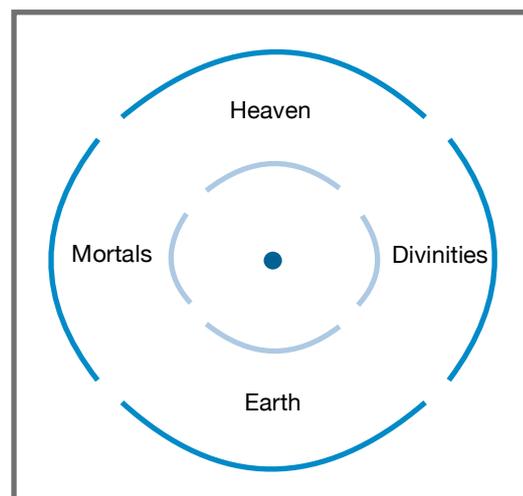


fig. 2

<sup>4</sup> Excluding perhaps Augmented Reality programs that are meant to serve as direct extensions of the non-virtual.

are necessary to uphold immersion.

This now can illustrate what is meant by second-order places. Virtual places are second-order in the sense, that the fourfold they gather is non-identical to a more basic fourfold. More basic is in this case to say of something that it is more autonomous.

The virtual second-order place must, in order to maintain immersion for its users, hide the existence of the underlying reality and therefore also the causal implications on it. Following Malpas I hold that the strength of acknowledging this relation lies in the fact that the causal dependence on the non-virtual also means that the virtual is causally effective on the non-virtual (Malpas 2009: 139). In the most obvious way by using non-virtual resources to power the virtual existence.

If the second-order place cannot acknowledge its non-autonomy without immersion breaks, and part of its non-autonomy is the effect actions within the virtual has on states outside of the virtual, then it follows that it cannot acknowledge such a relation. The consequence of this is that users of the second-order places must be actively alienated from the non-virtual reality.

On an environmental view in a time when we more than ever are prompted to be aware of the impact our actions have on the sustainability of our existence this is objectionable. One might for instance imagine a second-order place set up in such a way, that although actions within seems to have regular or expected consequences, they could have disproportionate consequences outside of the virtual, without the knowledge of the active agent, e.g. a virtual setup where every step taken causes immense deforestation. This is of course an extreme and unlikely example, but it serves to show the dynamic in question and we might still criticize it on less extreme grounds, ie. the resources it requires to power the servers necessary for your activity in the virtual.

We might, in other words, be lulled into a false belief of a self-sustaining world while being removed from the actual sustaining factor<sup>5</sup>. Of course, even with VR-Es, we are presently never completely untethered from the non-virtual. There is yet the anchoring feature of our embodiment in the non-virtual. So far, no technology exists that does not require our material self in the non-virtual to interact with the virtual. However, this does not save the virtual place from this critique, given that immersion is still possible (we forget ourselves, so to speak and accept a virtual counterpart for our embodiment, as in cases such as the rubber-hand illusion experiment, in which a rubber hand is placed in front of a test-person in such a way, that it appears to be their own hand and when prodded, they report the sensation appearing in the rubber hand, rather than their own. (Slater 2009: 3554).

Insofar as we have an ethical obligation to either ensure the well-being and possibilities of future generations or the well-being of the planet (however unclear that notion may be) or a combination of the two, it seems that wide-spread use of second-order places may be in opposition to such an obligation. As such, this paper might serve as the groundwork for a more thorough ethical examination of second-order places for researchers working with ethical design and like fields of work.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, I have argued that there is nothing about the virtual itself that excludes virtual reality environments from including places in the sense that I have presented. However, I have qualified this position by drawing on Jeff Malpas' idea of the non-autonomy of the virtual to introduce a distinction between first- and second-order places, VR-E places being an example of the latter. Second-order places are defined by the non-identity between the fourfold gathered and a more basic fourfold. I have also

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<sup>5</sup> A critique that might find suited allies amongst ecological marxists. See fx. (Foster 1999)

argued that it is a necessary feature of the VR-E to hide the relation to the non-virtual from its user to avoid immersion breaks. Building on this, I have presented an environmental critique of second-order places and their active alienation of the users from the actual consequences of their virtual actions on non-virtual reality and pointed to possible further works to be done.

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