

Kerstin Radde-Antweiler (Ed.)

Being Virtually Real?



**Virtual Worlds from a
Cultural Studies' Perspective.**

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ANOTHER TIME, ANOTHER SPACE

VIRTUAL WORLDS, MYTHS AND IMAGINATION

MARIA BEATRICE BITTARELLO

*Introduction*¹

Technology experts define as virtual worlds digitally constructed environments where peer-to-peer interaction can take place. This means that virtual worlds have been created only after the introduction of computers, Computer Aided Design and the Internet. Other scholars, instead, give to the expression ‘virtual worlds’ a different meaning, and argue that ‘virtual worlds’ have always existed, in literature, religion and art.² According to the first interpretation, the most important aspects of a virtual world are visual, according to the second the use of imagination is prominent. Both interpretations reflect and are based upon different readings of philosophical problems pertaining to the definition of what is actual and what is virtual, of what is original and what is copy (simulacrum). Such discussions are rooted in Plato’s distinction between the actual world of simulacra and the Empyrean world of ‘Ideas’.

This paper tries a re-appraisal of the issue of virtual worlds, by using an interdisciplinary approach which draws upon classical studies, cultural studies, and religious studies methodologies and theoretical elaborations. In the first part of the paper, I will first examine virtual worlds in ancient and medieval religious texts, then in fiction literature, including utopian thinking, science fiction and fantasy, pointing out how literary and visual aspects have always co-existed. Finally, I will examine virtual worlds in cinema – and cinema itself as virtual world – highlighting how the visual aspects of virtual worlds had become dominant with the introduction of this medium. The second part of the paper will point out how virtual worlds, whether portrayed in religious or fictional texts show the features of mythic spaces. Then cyberspace will be compared to pre-internet virtual worlds, pointing out the ‘mythic’ overtones attributed to this ‘new space’. After examining some the features of ‘virtual worlds’ online, I will conclude arguing for the central role played by mythopoesis (re-creation of

¹ The first part of this paper is partially based upon research undertaken for a lecture given at the University of Stirling in the Spring semester 2005.

² See Wertheim 1999; Ward 2000.

myths) and imagination even in online virtual world, and for the integration of online and offline life.

Virtual worlds in ancient and medieval religious texts and art

There is a long tradition of describing and representing virtual worlds in ancient literatures – particularly in myths (sacred stories) and religious texts. In this regard, the story of the journeys of the hero Gilgamesh is exemplar. According to the texts reconstructed by archaeologists and philologists from cuneiform tablets, Gilgamesh sets out to reach the immortal Utnapishtim, who lives in the land of Dilmun, in the garden of the sun. Dilmun is located far away – and it takes a long time for Gilgamesh to reach that place, which is the Mesopotamian ‘paradise’.

Another famous example is in the *Bible*, where ‘The Garden of Eden’ is described in detail. According to the *Genesis* book, the garden is located in the east; there grow beautiful and prodigious trees that give edible fruits – including the dangerous fruit that gives the knowledge of good and evil – and a river from which all the rivers of the world originate.³ As Dilmun, this place is connected to the promise of immortality – once Adam and Eve have been exiled, Cherubs will guard the road that brings to the Garden and to the tree of life.⁴

The *Bible* also describes the New Jerusalem, an utopian place, where the lion and the lamb live peacefully together. Not too different are Greek and Roman descriptions of the Golden Age, when ‘men’ lived as gods, knowing no misery, pain, death.⁵

In the ancient Greek literature, the most interesting example of a poem describing a number of virtual worlds is the *Odyssey*. The hero (Odysseus) is engaged in a journey that brings him to access several virtual worlds such as the remote island of the nymph Calypso,⁶ and that of the sorceress Circe.⁷ He also visits the fertile island of the Cyclopes, one-eyed giants,⁸ and that governed by Aeolus, lord of the winds,⁹ the land of the Lotus-eaters, who live

³ Gen. 2.8.

⁴ Gen. 3.24.

⁵ Hesiod describes the life of the men (women are not mentioned) of so-called golden race. They never experienced pain or concerns, were always young, free from diseases, had every material good they could desire and they spent their days banqueting, until they died – and death was as sweet as sleep (*Works and Days* 109-116ff.).

⁶ The island, named Ogygie, is the ‘navel of the Ocean’ (*Odyssey* 1-50), and is described as an idyllic place (*Odyssey* 5.55-78).

⁷ Aeaea is in the farthest east of the world (*Odyssey* 10.135-545).

⁸ *Odyssey* 9. 106-150.

⁹ *Odyssey* 10.1-79.

without pain, anxiety, and memory,¹⁰ and the ‘other world’ par excellence, the land of the dead.¹¹ In the *Aeneid*, the Trojan hero Aeneas also reaches the otherworld – this time entering a deep chasm.¹²

We find several more representations of virtual worlds in ancient art. Greek temples host representations of wars fought by heroes and gods against the Amazons, the Giants, or the Centaurs,¹³ as well as images of other fantastic creatures located in far away places.¹⁴ What is particularly interesting is that such representations were not confined to religious sacred spaces (temples, sanctuaries, and statues located in public spaces, i.e. state/society controlled spaces) but are also found on Greek vases – i.e. on objects used at home, in everyday life. The representations we find on Greek vases relate to famous mythical stories and show gods, heroes and fantastic – or monstrous – creatures.¹⁵ Though of course, not all the virtual worlds reach the complexity of the famous Vase François – the ancestor of comic books;¹⁶ what is clear is that far from being confined to religious spaces, gods, satyrs, nymphs, heroes, and monsters, formed already in antiquity, the ‘background’ of everyday life. Mythological scenes, such as the meeting between Odysseus and the Laestrygonians, are often found on the walls of ancient Roman houses.¹⁷ Such examples could be easily multiplied and confirm how the imaginary worlds described in myths and visually represented by artists have never been confined to separate spaces, but have always been an important part of everyday life since antiquity.

The Christian tradition re-read the virtual worlds inherited by the classical tradition and created several new virtual worlds. Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell were described and represented in detail, both in religious and literary texts. Dante Alighieri’s Christian poem, the

¹⁰ *Odyssey* 9.82-104.

¹¹ The underworld is located in the land of the Cimmerians (11.14-21). The *Odyssey* describes several other imaginary worlds inhabited by mythic creatures: the blessed island of the Phaeacians, Scheria (5.262-272) and the fabulous palace of Alcinoos (5.86-132), the country of the cannibal Laestrygonians (10.80-124); the island of the Sirens (12.39-46), and the island where is the golden cattle of Helios (the sun) (12.261-269).

¹² Virgil *Aeneid* 6.237-269.

¹³ Amazonomachies are common from the 7th century BCE on, particularly in Athens. The fight of the gods and Giants is in the Archaic treasury of the Siphians at Delphi and on the Hellenistic altar of Pergamum (Price & Kerns 2003, 228); the war between the Lapiths and the Centaurs is on the Parthenon (Price & Kerns 2003, 106).

¹⁴ Such as the Gorgons (Price & Kerns 2003, 231) and many other extraordinary beings, including the Sphinx and others deriving from Eastern art.

¹⁵ From Hercules fighting against the serpentine god Acheloo (Charbonneau, Martin & Villard, 1, 315, n. 361); to Gaia half-emerging from the soil (Price & Kerns 2003, 225); to several winged goddesses in archaic Greek art (Charbonneau, Martin & Villard, 1, 354 n. 407).

¹⁶ Charbonneau, Martin & Villard 1, 607, fig. 64.

¹⁷ Charbonneau, Martin & Villard 3, 168, fig. 171-172.

Divine Comedy describes the poet's journey through the tripartite otherworld; the Renaissance painter Hieronymus Bosch represents imaginary places to highlight the 'horror' of sin.¹⁸

Virtual Worlds in fiction Literature

The stories examined above were parts of religious traditions and claimed to be true. Since antiquity, however, we find other virtual worlds, which are not described in religious literature. A writer living in the Hellenistic period, Lucianus of Samosata, has represented in his dialogues the other world, and, in the *True Story*, a number of virtual, fantastic worlds – including the Moon.

There is a key difference, however, between heroes such as Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Aeneas, whose stories are myth – i.e. sacred history – and Lucius, who is an ordinary man – whose story does not pretend to be believed.¹⁹ We might say that Lucianus of Samosata represents a transition from myths (religious, must be believed) to fiction (untrue, aims at entertaining): the two kinds of imaginary worlds coexist, since then, in literature, art and, later, will coexist in cinema. For instance, in the Medieval age the imaginary worlds described in the Arthurian and the Holy Grail cycle are openly fictional – they do not claim to be religious truths.

Since the Renaissance, writers created a number of imaginary worlds, whose fictional nature is made clear by the authors – from the ideal and perfectly regulated cities imagined by Thomas More (Utopia), or Tommaso Campanella (City of the Sun), to Lilliput or the Yahoo society described by Swift in *Gulliver's Travels*. Drawing upon this tradition, fantasy writers have later created and described in detail a number of imaginary worlds. The most famous example of an endless catalogue is by far Middle-Earth, as portrayed in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Hobbit*. Tolkien's corpus of writings about Middle-Earth has given rise to a fantasy subgenre, which describes in detail languages and customs of several different (imaginary) peoples, their history, legends, and deeds. In the *Silmarillion*, Tolkien even describes the cosmogonic phase and the Golden Age of Arda (the Earth), long before the "awakening" of humankind, when elves and other beings ruled and shaped the world. Several

¹⁸ As in the paintings completed around 1500 CE and portraying the garden of earthly pleasures (now at the Prado Museum in Madrid).

¹⁹ The title *True Story* is ironic and points to the deceptive nature of Lucianus' work.

fantasy novels also deal with a long forgotten prehistory and with “lost cities”, such as the mythical Atlantis originally described by Plato in his dialogues.²⁰

Virtual worlds have often been described in the science fiction genre. These are located in unexplored regions of the Earth,²¹ or in the unexplored space, i.e. on other planets.²² Sometimes, imaginary worlds are located in a different time, usually in the future, and can be reached by using technological devices.²³

Science fiction novels or short stories portraying realities that coexist in the same time are especially interesting,²⁴ particularly because some writers postulate that those multiple realities are “*intercommunicating*” – or, more precisely – can become so by using specific technological devices.²⁵

Virtual Worlds and Cinema

I have shown until now how virtual worlds have been described in literature and represented in art. The invention of cinema, at the end of the 19th century, has added a new dimension to the issue. This section examines two different aspects of the relationship between virtual worlds and cinema. The first relates to the definition of cinema itself as virtual world, the second to how cinema portrays virtual worlds.

It can be argued that cinema itself is an example of alternative reality.²⁶ My argument takes into account two different though related aspects. The first is that cinema can be considered as an alternative reality, originating in special places, around which a mythological aura has been created by the media such as Hollywood or Bollywood. Cinema is “consumed” in a peculiar environment (in the dark of a theatre) and at set times. In a movie theatre, one comes into contact with worlds that appear to exist on an alternative plane of reality, inaccessible outside the cinema theatre.²⁷ The second aspect relates to the celebrity status acquired by many of

²⁰ *Timaeus*, 24e; *Critia*., 109ff.

²¹ As in Conan Doyle 1980.

²² See Van Vogt 1951.

²³ See Wells 1895, where the main character to reach the Earth of the future, inhabited by Eloi and Morloch, both descending from human beings; Asimov 1955; and a number of TV series (e.g. *Doctor Who*).

²⁴ As in Leinster 1950, or Brown 1948.

²⁵ Williamson 1932.

²⁶ What I am arguing here for cinema can easily applied to TV, TV stars and television series. The latter also represent imaginary worlds in great detail – *Star Trek* being an interesting example of mythological representations that become embodied in real life via the phenomenon of conventions.

²⁷ Analogies could be drawn between the ritualized consumption of films – which takes place in secluded, set apart spaces and at set periods of time – and religious rituals in new religions.

those involved in the making of films – whether they are actors, directors, or musicians. Their lives are (purposefully) represented by the global media industry as belonging to a particular sphere, normally inaccessible to most people. Luxury houses and cars, plastic surgery, fashion clothes, travels and ‘dream’ parties – not to mention transgression as way of life: the existence of Hollywood ‘stars’ truly belongs to a plane of reality presented as different from that where everyday life takes place. Therefore, the cinema industry ends up being perceived as a desirable, though dangerous world, inhabited by fantastic – if not monstrous creatures.

If cinema is in itself a virtual world, it also makes visible ‘imaginary worlds’, and has helped to construct a common visual imaginary all over the world – I will not dwell upon here on the important issue of the imperialistic nature of cinema, which emerges when certain countries and culture to impose their imaginary upon other cultures.²⁸ Paintings and statues had played in the past a similar function, but their influence was usually limited to educated elites. The preponderance of visual aspects, particularly in the first phase of the history of cinema, is particularly important here, since it has had an astounding influence on contemporary popular culture.

Rather than focusing on specific virtual worlds staged in specific movies,²⁹ I will rather focus here on how the many different genres through which cinema has been articulated in its century long life can be read as a virtual world, which follows precise representation rules.³⁰

If we examine science fiction cinema, we find that it deals with the themes developed by science fiction literature. The interplay between science fiction literature and cinema is particularly interesting, with cinema popularising, adapting, and visually re-shaping for a mainstream audience specific *topoi* elaborated by sci fi writers and proposing alternative realities and imaginary worlds, which express either utopian or dystopian visions, all somewhat opposed/opposing everyday life. Science fiction cinema is more closely related to fantasy cinema than it is often believed;³¹ while fantasy worlds are generally set in a mythic past and magic is one of their key components, science fiction films are usually set in the future and the stress is on science (or very often, on technology).

²⁸ Neither will I explore here the key role played by the cinema industry in contemporary consumerist society.

²⁹ Since the examples of virtual worlds presented in films are innumerable, I will just remind here of early films such as Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), which staged an imaginary world.

³⁰ I will not draw upon here on the innumerable studies on genre cinema and its functions, since I am focusing exclusively on cinema genres as virtual worlds.

³¹ As the *Star Wars* saga, located on the borderline between sci fi and fantasy, clearly exemplifies.

The horror genre stages a supernatural reality and plays with the unexplained, with hidden forces and fantastic creatures.³² It suggests that there is something hidden behind our everyday agreed reality – an alternative reality that coexists and risks to creep into everyday reality. Detection films play with the desire to discover and solve mysteries by using rational means; comedy alters the established meaning of reality by recurring to exaggeration and absurdity.

This very brief survey indicates that virtual worlds are portrayed both in myths and in fictional works, can be described or visually represented; and are an important part of human societies' shared knowledge. The next section explores the common features found in imaginary worlds as portrayed in religious texts and in fictional works. Then, the paper argues that cyberspace itself is ascribed today the same features found in pre-Internet virtual worlds.

Virtual worlds as mythic spaces

Do fictional virtual worlds – i.e. creation of the imagination that do not pretend (neither expect) to be believed as *true* such as Lucianus' Moon, the kingdom of the Fisherman King, Lilliput or Middle-Earth – share common features with those virtual worlds described in religious texts, and that, therefore, are expected to be considered real – such as the Garden of Eden, Hell or the New Jerusalem?

Scholars studying classical literary texts have outlined the main features of mythic countries and spaces, as described in religious and literary texts. According to such studies, mythic countries present, in ancient Greek and Roman authors, some key features.³³ In the first place, mythic space is intrinsically different from that of everyday life, because it is either inhabited by monstrous or fantastic creatures or because there happen prodigies, or because people's customs are different. Secondly, it is located far away, often to the farthest limits of the earth, so that it can be reached after a long and usually perilous journey – or by using unusual means (e.g. flying). In sum, mythic space is the opposite or reversal of the real world – it can be portrayed as a utopia (Paradise), or a dystopia (Hell).

Virtual worlds as represented in literary works are constructed in the same way, and present the same features of mythic space. They are located far away, sometimes – as we shall

³² One can think of films about vampires, monsters and evil creatures or forces. Superhero movies stage, instead, a desired reality (superpowers are desirable).

³³ See Jouan & Deforge 1988.

see – on a different plane of reality or in a different time; such places are inhabited by monstrous, divine, or prodigious creatures, and they are a space where marvellous events take place.

A third key aspect shared by mythic spaces and fictional virtual worlds pertains to *how* virtual worlds can be reached. If we go back to the religious and literary texts examined, we find that there are several different ways to reach virtual worlds. The first way is dream – i.e. you enter a virtual world while dreaming – or you have a vision – i.e. your state of consciousness is different from that of daily life. The second way is travel. Visitors of imaginary worlds often ride or walk through deserts, forests or other inhospitable places.³⁴ Often they use devices such as ships, spaceships, or other means of transport.³⁵

There is, however, a third way of reaching a virtual world – through a *gateway* to another world or alternative reality. This can be conceived of as a mirror,³⁶ or as some other sort of technological device;³⁷ in some cases there are no devices, rather a mysterious, instantaneous transition from a reality to the other,³⁸ an expedient already used by Dante Alighieri in his *Commedia*. At the beginning of the poem, Dante finds himself ('mi ritrovai') in a dark forest, where he meets three dangerous wild beasts. Leaving aside the metaphoric meaning of Dante's description, what emerges is that we are not told *how* he found himself there neither *how* Virgil guides him to the entrance of Hell.³⁹ Dante, and with him all his readers, are suddenly projected in the midst of action, which suggests that there has been and instantaneous transition from *this* world to the virtual world – or, rather, that the two occupy the same space.

We can conclude, then, that virtual worlds are conceived of as being located on a different (metaphysical) plane of reality. They are places where the rules are different from those of everyday life, located far away, and, therefore, unreachable without using a specific (often technological) device – whether the technology is a ship, a spaceship, or 'something else'.

³⁴ In the *Orlando Furioso* Astolfo flies to the Garden of Eden on the hippogriff, half horse and half griffin – 34.48-52; then, he flies to the Moon, which is imagined as a sort of immense "lost property office", on the prophet Elias' chariot (34.68-69).

³⁵ *Doctor Who* used the TARDIS, which looked like a telephone box.

³⁶ See Borges 1940; Williamson 1932.

³⁷ Such as a time machine Wells' *Time Machine*; Asimov 1955.

³⁸ See Leinster 1950, or Brown 1948. In some cases, such transition can be explained as an anomaly in the space/time continuum.

³⁹ The instantaneous transition from a world to the other is a device the poet uses several times in the *Divine Comedy*, where the character(s) are (is) projected into different realities instantaneously. Moreover, a transition from a situation to the other is obtained because Dante – narrator and main character – suddenly faints and wakes up in a different place.

Cyberspace, mythic Spaces, and Virtuality

As all those whose personal computer has crashed at least once know very well, cyberspace is not a space that you can access if you do not possess the appropriate hardware and software – i.e. the appropriate technological devices (or transport means). Where is then cyberspace?

Several commentators, scholars and users have portrayed cyberspace as a new Heaven – as the gateway to a magic, alternative world.⁴⁰ In other words, there are often religious overtones in the way cyberspace is represented. Not only has Graham Ward defined cyberspace ‘the scientific solution to the death of God’⁴¹ (247), but in Margaret Wertheim’s view:

“the ‘spiritual’ appeal of cyberspace lies in precisely this paradox: it is a repackaging of the old idea of heaven but in a secular, technologically sanctioned format. The perfect realm awaits for us, we are told, not behind the pearly gates, but beyond the network gateways, behind electronic doors labeled ‘.com’, ‘net’, and ‘edu’.”⁴²

In Wertheim’s reconstruction of the history of space in the West, she argues that the reduction of space to *exclusively* physical space has had serious repercussions:

“The very homogenization of space that is at the heart of modern cosmology’s success is also responsible for the banishment from our world picture of any kind of spiritual space. In a *homogeneous* space only *one* kind of reality can be accommodated, arid in the scientific world picture that is the *physical reality* of *matter*. In medieval cosmology, the accommodation of body and soul had been premised on the belief that space was *in homogeneous*. By rendering obsolete the old division between terrestrial and celestial space modern cosmologists forced their own metaphysical band and reduced reality to just one half of the classical body-soul dimorphism. Moreover, once this physical space was itself extended to infinity, there was no ‘room’ left for any kind of spiritual space [...] once the physical world became infinite, where could any kind of spiritual realm possibly be? By *unbounding* the physical realm, the Christian spiritual realm was thereby squeezed out of the cosmic system. That excision precipitated in the Western world a psychological crisis whose effects we are still wrestling with today.[emphasis in the original text]”⁴³

⁴⁰ As documented in Graham 2001, 71-73; Wertheim 1999, 151.

⁴¹ Ward 2000, 247.

⁴² Wertheim 1999, 21.

⁴³ Wertheim 1999, 149-150. Wertheim notes that this “is a specifically Western problem. The reason we *lost* our spiritual space, as it were, is because we had linked it to celestial space. We had ‘located’ it, metaphorically speaking, up there beyond the stars. When celestial space became infinite, our spiritual space was thereby annihilated.”

Wertheim's reconstruction is particularly interesting because she argues that:

“from the late seventeenth century on, the new physicalist vision has been invoked as a powerful epistemic scythe to hack off *anything* that could not be accommodated into the materialist conception of reality. Increasingly over the past three centuries, reality has come to be seen as the *physical* world alone. Thus as I stated at the start of this work, it is a complete misnomer to call the modern scientific world picture dualistic; it is *monistic*, admitting the reality *only* of physical phenomena.[emphasis in the original text]”⁴⁴

In sum, Wertheim has convincingly argued that cyberspace represents the return of metaphysical space in Western culture; I agree on the fact that cyberspace seems to be conceived of as a space that coincides with physical space though it cannot be located in the physical world.⁴⁵ I also agree that cyberspace seems to have been constructed by many users and by some scholars as a technological substitute of Heaven, where human beings are ‘finally’ freed from the weight of the body. However, I would propose a somewhat different interpretation of the way participants construct and play with online virtual worlds.

I would argue that people do not seem to use virtual worlds as a form of escapism, creating a second, vicarious life online. On the contrary, we have an integration of life online and life offline, because both are (obviously) experienced via the body. There does not seem to be a desire to transfer one's life on the Web, but rather to experiment in and with this “other” plane of reality. Therefore, we could talk of osmosis – to use a biological metaphor – rather than of mechanic separation between the two realities (the digital and the physical).

My interpretation is based upon what has emerged from the survey of literary and visual pre-Internet virtual worlds, in particular about the interplay between the world of the imagination (a world of ‘possibility’) and the ‘real world’ (a world of ‘actuality’). My argument draws upon several recent re-conceptualizations of key concepts such as that of virtuality (Doel & Clark), of studies on sociomental bonds (Chayko), on performance of religious identity on the Internet (Cowan & Dawson), and of the way we experience cyberspace as embodied beings (De Vall).

We have seen that Wertheim argues that cyberspace brings back an old dualistic conception of space (physical space/metaphysical space). The key point is that the existence of an infinite number of coexisting realities (as theorised by contemporary physicists), implies that people *could* slip from one reality to the other. Such idea has several consequences. Not

⁴⁴ Wertheim 1999, 151.

⁴⁵ While it is possible to locate web-pages, back-up memories and hardware, it is not possible physically locating ‘cyberspace’ as such.

only there is not a stable, fixed reality, which is the only ‘real’, ‘actual’ reality – i.e. there is this world and ‘other’ virtual worlds can be imagined, but if multiple realities coexist they are interchangeable. In other words, if one can slip from one reality to another one, how can you tell that one is real and the other one is virtual?

To explain more clearly this point, I would refer to the situation presented in a film by David Cronenberg, *eXistenZ* (1999), which represents a virtual reality game; the underlying idea of the movie is that it is possible shifting from a reality to the other. The film plays a game of Chinese boxes and seems to suggest that all reality is virtual (or simulation). This is somewhat analogous to the situation presented in Woody Allen’s *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985); however, while in Allen’s film the fictional characters come into ‘our’ physical reality, what is interesting in *eXistenZ*

“is that it thematizes the increasing interpenetration of reality and simulation, our bodily involvement in a variety of virtual worlds and the bewildering sense of losing one’s grip on what is really happening and what is only faked.”⁴⁶

The virtual world, in this case, can be reached only by using a technological device that guarantees an instantaneous transition from ‘this’ reality to a different one, thus becoming a substitute for travel, dream, or Dante’s sudden fainting. The central point is, nonetheless, as Cronenberg points out in his voiceover comment to the DVD version of the film, that the virtual reality is experienced via the body. This is an important point, since, in previous literary and cinematic descriptions of cyberspace, characters accessed virtual worlds by leaving behind their bodies.⁴⁷

Virtual Worlds on the Internet

In this section, I examine the structural features of digitally created virtual worlds online, and compare these features to pre-Internet virtual worlds. I will not examine in detail specific examples of virtual worlds – rather, but I will focus on the features of virtual worlds online as they emerge from scholarly literature.

Until now, we have seen how people could share common imaginary worlds, by reading the same book, watching the same painting or movie. Each medium – book (or story-

⁴⁶ De Vall 2002, 142.

⁴⁷ As in *Neuromancer* (1982), or in the *Matrix* (1999).

telling),⁴⁸ visual art, and cinema had its own specific features. I have argued that literature, art, and cinema have represented virtual worlds, that imagination has a central role in all of them and that they constitute a reality alternative to everyday life – though the two realities are not simply intercommunicating but in an ‘osmotic’ relationship.

Cyberspace shares certain features of literary, visual and cinematic virtual worlds, while presenting specific traits. Since the 1990s, programmers and scholars have begun to focus their attention on the development of virtual worlds online. Richard Bartle, one of the creators of MUD1 (Multi User Domain/Dungeon), describes the key features of a virtual world as follows: underlying rules (or physics), user representation (i.e. graphical representations, called avatars, of each participant), real time interaction (by using interactive chat tools such as a writing pad window), a shared world, and world persistence.⁴⁹ In sum, they present fully fledged alternative realities; the only new element, I would point out, is interactivity.

The use of avatars – cartoon-like figures – in digital environments is particularly interesting because the term *avatar* has been borrowed from Hindu mythology, where it indicated the incarnation/manifestation of a god (or goddess). The avatar was independent from the god/goddess, but also constantly participating of his/her real (divine) nature; this is somewhat analogous to the relationship between the embodied player, who is in an actual place, controls his/her avatar, and *watches it* while it moves in a digital ‘space’-separated from, though connected to, the person it represents.

The 2D or 3D digital environment is a later development, since virtual worlds were originally text-based. They have soon begun to be used as social meeting places, where several activities take place. They have attracted early the attention of social scientists and other scholars, from economists⁵⁰ to psychologists, education experts,⁵¹ and students of religion. Social scientists have begun to track human behaviours in virtual worlds, using them as environments to study human interactions and even to solve social problems. As an early study has noted, users preferred to design their own culture in virtual worlds;⁵² in other words, what is taking place in virtual worlds is mythopoeic activity – the creation of imaginary cultures that do not exist outside the virtual world.

⁴⁸ It is worth noting that radio is the medium that has first brought back storytelling in contemporary world.

⁴⁹ Cf. Bartle 2004.

⁵⁰ Castronova 2001.

⁵¹ See, for instance, Dickey 2005 on Active Worlds and distance learning activities.

⁵² See Morningstar & Farmer 1991, 273-302.

Studies on religion in virtual worlds started at the end of the 1990s. One of the first studies on virtual environments used for religious activity,⁵³ focused on the behaviour of the participants who both tried to adapt rituals *and* to find new ways to perform rituals online.⁵⁴ Once again, the creativity of online interaction emerged as one of the key components of virtual worlds. Also, in their description of virtual worlds Schroeder and his colleagues point out a key element, the presence of both visual aspects (“three dimensional space with buildings and landscapes”) and written words (“users can interact with each other via text windows”). Cyberspace, then, brings together texts and images, in a way which is analogous to that of medieval manuscripts.

Conclusions: What are Virtual Worlds for?

The paper has examined how a number of different ‘virtual worlds’ have been created before the Internet, arguing that cyberspace itself is conceived of as a virtual world. Virtual environments designated as ‘virtual worlds’ on the Internet have also been examined.

The final question to address is now: what are virtual worlds for? What has emerged from the analysis of realities as different as ancient literary and religious texts, genre literature, cinema and cyberspace?

First, we have established that virtual worlds, i.e. spaces that are intrinsically different from the actual reality we experience everyday, are unreachable without the help of a device. This device can be a dream, the guided use of imagination – through techniques, such as visualization, that help to shift from an everyday state of consciousness to another (e.g. in Neopaganism) – or a technological device, such a ship – or the Internet.

Second, we have begun to see that, in pre-Internet virtual worlds, characters experience such places without leaving behind their body, whether they visit the land of the dead (as Odysseus and Aeneas, or Dante), or other worlds. And, as a reader – or observer – you are necessarily embodied.

Third, a virtual world is a space for freedom – as Cronenberg’s comments on the ‘promise of freedom’ made by Allegra Geller to Pikul in *eXistenZ* highlight. Some authors writing on cyberspace, such Howard Rheingold, also stress this aspect. However, it is important to define

⁵³ Schroeder et al. 1998.

⁵⁴ An earlier study of online rituals in text-based virtual environments by O’Leary (1998) has now become a classic text on the topic.

more precisely what ‘space for freedom’ means. Experience made in mythic spaces is useful because it becomes a sort of training that will be helpful in everyday life. Experiencing a virtual world, therefore, can be life-changing for participants – although they cannot bring anything back from there, the experience of a virtual world has *real* effects on players. In other words, you cannot bring an apple from a virtual world into the ‘real world’, but what you experience there becomes part of you and, thus, has real effects in the real world.

The fourth key element is particularly important. What do players do in a virtual world in cyberspace? One may be surprised to learn that they perform very ordinary actions: they walk, they sit down and stand up, they talk and chat, they pray – and kneel – they eat, they have discussions and flirt... If we consider what heroes and travellers do in *their* virtual worlds we find that they travel (navigate a ship, ride a horse or walk), have conversations, eat, sleep, pray, fall in love and have sex, participate to races, discuss, kill animals (to procure food), and, in some cases, fight. These are *not* extraordinary actions, but, rather, *ordinary actions in an extraordinary context*. Therefore, characters in a virtual world ride, but not a horse: a hippogriff; they have a chat – but with nymphs, gods, aliens; they fight against giants and monsters.

This situation presents a surprising analogy with the activities taking place in virtual worlds. As sociologists have begun to show, the new virtual space is used as a place where surfers experiment with possibilities and perform different identities – they do ordinary things in a ‘virtual’ space. We can consider how users shaped one of the first virtual worlds, such as Habitat, which was an entertainment-oriented environment and provided the participants with the opportunity to experiment real life roles (wife/husband; man/woman; adherent to a new religion; businessman), and several identities.⁵⁵

Virtual worlds, whether literary, visual or technological, are learning places even when we watch a film it is natural thinking: ‘What would I do in that situation?’ Cyberspace offers precisely this possibility: exploring possibilities and mythopoeically re-creating one’s reality, by integrating in one’s (everyday, actual) experience what is experienced in the virtual world.

In other words, criticism of virtual worlds such as that expressed by Haywood, who is rightly concerned about the potentially exclusive and disengaged nature of cyberspace,⁵⁶ does not take into account precisely the aspects pointed out above. The point is not that “we will

⁵⁵ Cf. Morningstar & Farmer 1991, 273-302.

⁵⁶ Cf. Haywood 1998, 29-30: “Remote means remote, and while occasional remoteness may corrupt, absolute remoteness will corrupt absolutely...to be effective for all citizens, including those left outside the electronic club, [networking] has to be followed up by action in the real space which they inhabit.”

have forgotten how [the real world] works,”⁵⁷ as Haywood forecasted; on the contrary, virtual worlds have always been an attempt to engage with reality (mythopoeically): they are a sort of ‘training place’.

The new element is, paradoxically, that the stress on embodied experience is today even stronger than it has ever been. In saying this, I argue against several scholars arguing for cyberspace as disembodied, often alienating experience. We could rather usefully adopt the analogy of the gym. Hours spent at the gym are not set aside, but rather integrated in daily life. In this I follow Doel & Clarke, who have argued that reality is (actuality-virtuality) – thus cyberspace is not a simulacrum, a false copy of reality. It is, rather, ‘something else’, something that, as we have seen through the examples examined in this paper, has always existed and has been expressed through different media (story telling, literature, art, cinema). Also, there is not, for most users, a temptation to leave behind the body, and not only because we can never leave behind our bodies when “going to cyberspace”. I would substantially agree with De Vall’s thesis:

“I suggest that the phenomenological characteristics of cyberspace are not only determined by the technological possibilities of existing hardware and software to create virtual worlds but also by the conditions of the reception of these worlds. Rather than speaking of virtual as opposed to real spaces, I would speak of a plurality of spaces that are all in different degrees partly real and partly virtual.”⁵⁸

The survey of pre-Internet virtual worlds confirms this interpenetration of spaces and realities, in which the human body-mind is located. The ability to interact with others, to establish with unknown people what Mary Chayko calls “sociomental bonds”, is a faculty that is not new. When we feel moved by what happens to someone we never met, or write a letter to a pen pal, we show that we have established a bond with either completely imaginary beings or with someone we might never meet.⁵⁹

Freedom, exploration, experimentation, visual representation, yes – but *integrated* in daily life. Unfortunately, a masculinist, patriarchal way of constructing and presenting cyberspace, virtual worlds on the Internet and virtual reality technologies, aiming at widening the supposed independence of mind and body, and reflecting a deep suspicion of the body is still conditioning studies on cyberspace – and virtual worlds. Some recent sociological studies

⁵⁷ Haywood 1998, 30.

⁵⁸ De Vall 2002, 147.

⁵⁹ See Chayko 2002, 1-5, 127, 148.

have finally started to acknowledge the existence of such rhetorical attitude, which had already been recognised by other scholars.⁶⁰

“This rhetoric seems to have been adopted almost uncritically within many sociological accounts of ‘virtual’ technologies. If we focus on accounts of VR for example, sociologists have argued that a major appeal is the ability to ‘park’ the flawed human body, to transcend the limits of the flesh, to create and explore new identities, to be free the body from social and physical constraint and so on and so forth.[emphasis added]”⁶¹

It is worth reminding that imagination itself, as all other faculties, is not a disembodied gift, but it is rooted in our overall (physical) experience of the world. We can create myths that are the reversal, or enhancement, of the reality we experience – myths that give meaning, re-inscribe, and re-orient that reality. Virtual worlds have always proposed alternative realities, which were always qualitatively different from the actual world – not perfect copies of that world.⁶² This is, by the way, the reason why the two coexisted, because, as Doel and Clark have argued, reality is the interplay of virtuality and actuality:

“reality is not the actualisation of a set of possibilities in a given time and space, an actualisation that would unfold a serial exhaustion of the world’s possibilities – reality equals actuality, or, if you prefer, a given reality is only one of the world’s stock of possibilities... Reality is the immanent twofold of actuality-virtuality. Such a twofold is never given in advance, like the matrix of possibility is supposed to be; it always has to be created and worked over in situ.”⁶³

⁶⁰ See Graham 2001, 71-73; Bingham 1999, 250.

⁶¹ Hindmarsch et al. 2006, 797

⁶² Hindmarsch et al. 2006, 797: “Research has been driven by a commitment to build environments and interfaces through a complex array of technologies which aim to provide the illusion of, simulate, or are even indistinguishable from the physical world. Although such rhetoric has more recently been downplayed amongst the VR community, there persists an overriding concern with the factors that influence the sense of ‘presence’ in virtual worlds.” The authors add, in note, that “Indeed similar statements of intent regarding the pursuit of graphical realism foreshadowed the proliferation of television, film and photography” (815, n 1).

⁶³ Doel & Clark 1999, 279.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

MARIA BEATRICE BITTARELLO is a PhD candidate in Religious Studies at the University of Stirling (Scotland, UK). Her main research focus is on Internet Neopaganism – she has published articles on Neopagan Goddess pilgrimages in the *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change* and on body, religion and technology in popular culture and Neopaganism in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (forthcoming).

Address: Maria Beatrice Bittarello
School of Languages, Cultures and Religions
University of Stirling,
Stirling, Scotland, UK, FK9 4LA

E-Mail: m_bittarello@yahoo.it