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VIRTUAL SUBJECTIVITIES: A REVIEW OF STEFANO GUALENI AND DANIEL VELLA'S *VIRTUAL EXISTENTIALISM*

Stefano Gualeni and Daniel Vella, *Virtual Existentialism: Meaning and Subjectivity in Virtual Worlds*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Virtual Existentialism is a short book. Like all the titles in the Palgrave Pivot series, the text is intentionally formulated to fit somewhere in between the length of a journal article and a monograph. This concision is simultaneously an advantage and a challenge. On the one hand, a book of this limited length allows readers quick and easy access to an innovative approach to games and games studies – one that leverages the rich traditions and resources of 20th century existential philosophy. Readers are able to get up to speed with minimal investment in terms of time and effort, and this is something that works extremely well for a generation raised on shorter bursts of textual information supplied by digital media. On the other hand, the need to keep things tightly focused and succinct does require the bracketing or marginalization of important subjects that, for one reason or another, resist being sidelined. To their credit, the authors are fully

aware of these decisive choices and directly address the opportunities and challenges of their strategic decisions. But the reasons for and consequences of these exclusions does, in the final analysis, leave one wanting more than a book of this size can possibly deliver.

The book is organized into two main parts. The first part, which consists of the first two chapters, establishes the theoretical framework of the analysis. The first chapter, “Virtual Subjectivities and the Existential Significance of Virtual Worlds”, introduces the organizing concept of “virtual subjectivity,” which the authors define as the subjective sense of self that relates to one’s being-in-the-virtual-world. This characterization proceeds by drawing on the terminology and theoretical resources made available in existential philosophy – thrownness, existential projection, being-in-the-world, etc. Of crucial significance here is the notion of nested existential positionality

– the idea that players simultaneously inhabit a subjective standpoint internal to the gameworld and their own subjective standpoint as an individual external to the gameworld. This double perspective (or what is also called, later in the book, a “double consciousness”) is a useful contribution to the existing literature as it can help make sense of the way players move into and out of the virtual experience.

The second chapter, “En-roling and De-roling in Virtual Worlds,” follows this line of reasoning by investigating how users navigate and make sense of these changing and changeable subject positions. As the authors correctly point out, there is a significant body of work on subjectivities in virtual worlds but relatively little addressing the transitions into and out of these multiple and different subjectivities. The second chapter considers the processes and the rituals of what the authors call the “en-roling” into and “de-roling” from virtual subjectivities. For this reason, the chapter is less dependent on the literature and terminology of existential philosophy and more involved with and informed by work in psychodrama and dramatherapy. The goal of the chapter is “to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the transformative and therapeutic possibilities and advantages afforded by adopting virtual subjectivities in virtual worlds” (p. 26).

Pursing this particular course of investigation, however, does require a concession that complicates the existentialist framework and effects what follows from it. Specifically, the authors find it necessary to differentiate between the actual or real “everyday” self and the

virtual subjectivities or digital masks that one may take on and off and play-with in the simulated space of a virtual world. This difference is the defining condition of Western metaphysics. It is evident in Platonism, which had differentiated between actual being, which remains persistently the same, and mere appearances that can be multiple and endlessly altered. It finds expression in the modern era with Cartesian dualism, which locates the essence of human identity in *res cogitans* as opposed to the vicissitudes of *res extensa*. And it has been the standard operating presumption for the way game studies typically explains and understands the subjectivity of the avatar: “While the more fundamental personality of the real person is still driving in the background,” Tom Boellstorff (2008: 132) writes, “it’s filtered through a different surface persona.”

The authors are not unaware of the problems and potential risks of deploying and defending this metaphysical tradition, and, in the second chapter, they acknowledge it directly by way of citing the work of Goffman. “The work of Erving Goffman on selfhood, for example, could cast a problematic light on this idea (i.e. that one can discern a stable, unified sense of the everyday ‘self’)... For Goffman, the boundaries between the various roles we can adopt are blurred and porous, and identity is something that is always performative and in a state of flux” (p. 27). Later in the book, in the final chapter in fact, they will come at it again by way of Eugene Fink’s engagement with the mask, which the authors explain in the following way: “As is the case with Fink’s notion of play, though,

this is not just about the ability to take on one specific other identity. Rather, it is about the fact that virtuality destabilizes the idea of a single self in a single world, and might allow – at least in theory – for a more fluid and multifaceted understanding of selfhood, thus blurring the distinction between the actualized self and its potentialities” (p. 105).

In both cases, however, the book noticeably struggles against the insights supplied by these two theorists and tries to manage or redirect their impact and significance. Playing with virtual subjectivity has the potential to reconfigure traditional metaphysical assumptions and affordances, demonstrating how the concept of a stable, unified sense of the everyday self situated in the “real world” may be just as variable and alterable as virtual subjectivities appear to be in the space of the game. Instead of pursuing this critical opportunity, *Virtual Existentialism* opts to defend the traditional way of thinking and its investments in ontological difference. Here is how this decision is explained and justified in the final chapter: “The existential promise that Fink identifies in play – and that we have considered in the virtual as a particular technological manifestation of play – needs to be qualified. This fluidity of the self is not absolute, and one’s actual self continues to occupy a central position” (p. 106). Although this assertion is understandable within the context of the analysis, it is simply asserted and not sufficiently established by way of persuasive argumentation or evidence.

The second part of the book consists of four shorter chapters, each of which engages with the thought of a different

philosophical figure, applying their ideas to the concept of virtual subjectivity. What is remarkable about these four chapters is their choice of “philosophical figures.” Here one does not find the usual suspects (i.e. Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Camus, etc.) apart from the one notable exception, Jean Paul Sartre. But even with Sartre, the subject of chapter 6, the work that has been selected for analysis is not Sartre’s magnum opus, *Being and Nothing*; it is the lesser known *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*.

The other philosophers included in this second part are Helmuth Plessner (chapter 4), Peter W. Zapffe (chapter 5), and Eugen Fink (chapter 7). These are not “top tier” existentialist thinkers, but they supply, as I think the authors demonstrate with exceptional dexterity, much needed perspective for addressing the opportunities and challenges of virtual subjectivity. Plessner, who was a contemporary of Heidegger and a student of Max Scheler, has remained on the sidelines of the history of 20th century philosophy, and his major contribution, a book titled *Levels of the Organic Life and the Human* was not available in English translation until 2019. Despite this fact, Gualani and Vella make a compelling case for applying Plessner’s unique brand of philosophical anthropology to the study of virtual worlds.

A similar situation befalls Zapffe, the Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer, who advanced an innovative characterization of the human being as a tragic, overdetermined animal that is an exorbitant excess within the natural world. Fink, who may be the best known

figure in this threesome, mainly because of his affiliation with both Husserl and Heidegger, completes the second part of the book. In the final chapter, the authors focus on Fink's 1960 book *Play as Symbol of the World*. It is remarkable and rather surprising that this text and Fink's unique analysis of play has not been featured more prominently in game studies. Fortunately, Gualani and Vella repair this oversight, effectively demonstrating how Fink's innovative investigations can inform our understanding and experiences of game worlds.

But like all such choices, the decision concerning which theorists to include and which one(s) to exclude has consequences. In particular, the marginalization of Martin Heidegger and wholesale exclusion of Søren Kierkegaard does have a noticeable impact on the direction of the analysis. Although there is some mention of Heidegger, mainly by way of the concept of thrownness or *Geworfenheit*, there are two additional areas where his work could provide some value-added insight. The first has to do with the way the concept of technology is understood and operationalized. Right at the beginning, in the context of the Introduction, the authors define technology in the following manner: "we argue that technology cannot be understood in a merely instrumental fashion, but needs to be embraced as a characteristic way of how human beings are in the world, a way that is created by humans and – in turn – is constitutive of humans" (p. xxvi). This characterization sounds surprisingly close to what was developed by Heidegger in the essay "The Question Concerning Technology" (Heidegger

1977) and directly engaging that previously published material would not only help substantiate the provided definition of technology but would also fill-out some of the missing details in its presentation.

The second concerns the apparent exclusion or marginalization of intersubjective experience. *Virtual Existentialism* decides to focus its analytical attention on the experience of the individual subject's being-in-the-virtual-world. This formulation of subjectivity is admittedly isolated, lonely, and largely self-contained. Consequently, what remains conspicuously absent are others, and the opportunities and challenges of intersubjective experience. In Heidegger's *Being and Time*, this is formulated in terms of *Mitsein*, the fact that human existence (*Dasein*) is not just being-in-the-world but also and always already "being-with" and alongside others (Heidegger 1962: 149). This alternative dimension opens the space for ethics and the existential questions of response and responsibility in the face of others. Although Heidegger is often criticized for lacking an explicit formulation of ethics, it is Kierkegaard and others, like Emmanuel Levinas, who pursue this line of thinking and develop it further.

As explained in the Introduction, *Virtual Existentialism* has a twofold purpose: "It uses existential philosophy as a frame through which to understand and interpret the significance of virtual environments in the context of our existence. At the same time, it considers how our capacity to be in (and towards) these technologically mediated domains might lead to new understandings of

the concerns of existential philosophy” (p. xvii). In the final analysis, only one of these appears to have been achieved. *Virtual Existentialism* does an excellent job connecting the dots between existential philosophy and the subjective experiences of players in the virtual world of games. The authors not only employ existentialist terminology to name and identify important elements of the experience of virtual subjectivity but demonstrate how existential philosophy – an intellectual tradition that has not been widely deployed in game studies – can help provide theoretical resources for describing and making sense of being-in-the-virtual-world. The analysis may not be entirely complete – due to the fact that the authors had found it necessary to marginalize questions of intersubjectivity and ethics – but the book does deliver on its promise.

It is the other vector, however, that remains under-developed. Virtual worlds do in fact have the capability to contribute something new to the traditions of existential philosophy. In particular, our experiences in the virtual world can open-up existential philosophy to a critical engagement with the tradition’s own metaphysical assumptions and affordances. But instead of pursuing the exigencies

of this opportunity, *Virtual Existentialism* makes a decision that reassert and falls back into the metaphysical status quo. It is a decision that serves the specific trajectory and purpose of the book, but it may leave readers unsatisfied and wanting more.

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