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Towards an Application of Theory to Virtual Worlds: from the Virtual to the Actual (0111)

In this paper, I wish to explore the phenomenon of social media and virtual worlds in education. The use of these media in education is clearly offering new roles, or what we might call positions, for the instructor and learner – whether this be through the assumption of their traditional roles as student and learner or in the guise of other, simulated roles, such as we might find in a simulation - 3D virtual worlds like Second Life included. The proliferation of online spaces, communities and avatars in blended and distance learning demands an investigation at a functional level: what are the roles we play within these environments? What is the nature of our experience within these so-called 'virtual' environments and what constitutes and affects our interpreted presence within them? And, is 'virtual' the correct term to use in these situations? In light of the user's emotional investment in the community, evidenced for example by a user's emotional discomfort at being 'defriended', it would indicate that such a response is interpreted as real and valid. The following paper will therefore attempt to offer a theoretical framework from which we might begin to understand how virtual social communities function and what this might mean for educational and simulation purposes.

To situate online social environments and virtual worlds, I will invoke the branch of philosophy known as phenomenology. Phenomenology is interested in the nature of consciousness, and what happens when we experience something that our attention is attached to. There is no such thing as a self-contained thought; all conscious thought must be directed at an object – or must intend an object. It must follow, then, that all matter and objects experienced are similarly both subsumed and constituted within our subjective mind, and the phenomenon becomes unified within us – a monistic theory of self and object. The phenomenal experience, then, constructs and constitutes my lived experience: by focusing on the experiential, its practitioners argue, we become closer to a more reliable knowledge of the way things really are. The focus of this discipline, however, is on the conditions that enable knowledge of our world to emerge. Moreover, phenomenology understands consciousness, not as an object or thing but as an activity. In this way, virtual world theorist, Lars Qvortrup writes that '[w]hen we as human beings interpret behaviour as something reflecting an intention, we observe the behaviour as communication'.[1] If we recognize something as a communication, then we have to also question its virtuality. Similarly, if we perceive that a human communication has taken place, then at some level does the message not also become embodied? Do we not respond with our bodies at a primary level before engaging our reflective minds? In *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty argues that bodily experience or perspective is our primary way of understanding the world:

My body is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my 'comprehension'. […] It is my body which gives significance not only to the natural object, but also to cultural objects like words.[2]

He goes on to explain how words like warm and hard '[b]efore becoming the indication of a concept' are 'first of all an event which grips my body, and this circumscribes the area of significance to which it has reference'.[3] Thus, a visceral experience takes place which affects and has import for any subsequent cognitions. Countering traditional philosophy, Merleau-Ponty posits that abstract thought and reason are not the essential ways of understanding our world, but direct perception is: 'the *perceived* world is the always presupposed foundation of all rationality, all value, and all existence.'[4]

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[1] Lars Qvortrup, ed. *Virtual Interaction: Interaction in Virtual Inhabited 3D Worlds* (London: Springer-Verlag, 2001), 8.

[2] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 273.

[3] Ibid., 273–4.

[4] Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art History, and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 13, cited in Wayne D. Bowman, *Philosophical Perspectives on Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press), 261.

Phenomenological theory fits well with the experiential nature of virtual worlds and environments, as these worlds are arguably something in which we live through – a *Lebenswelt*, as Edmund Husserl puts it.[5] However, any typical virtual world can only ever present a partial view of its members. When we interact with another avatar, we can therefore only experience selected aspects of this representation, aspect perception – selected parts to represent the whole, resulting in a metonymic type of experience. To explicate this further, we may think of this presentation as a frame: online social engagement, whether this is an interaction with another member of a networking community or a 3D virtual world, it takes place within the confines of a two-dimensional web space which is additionally framed by the computer monitor, laptop, tablet or mobile screen.

In conclusion, I hope to have presented some exploratory theory towards an understanding of our engagement and interactions in virtual worlds. The relative novelty of these environments and their increasing proliferation in educational contexts suggests the need for a better understanding of the terms virtual and actual when applied to pedagogy. The emulation and articulation of the physical and metaphorical body in virtual worlds recommends a systematic development of phenomenological and metaphorical theory. Moreover, an effective theoretical framework should hopefully lead towards better designed research hypotheses and empirical investigations of these environments inthe future. Role playing, simulation work, and community networks have much to offer education and it is vital that we attempt to understand some of the mechanisms underlying our interactions in this space. Accordingly, phenomenology and metaphorical transference offer rich environments in which to understand our so-called virtual interactions.

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[5] *Lebenswelt* literally translates as 'life world' and is a Husserlian term meaning the world as it is encountered in our experience, the revealed presence of the phenomenal world, the world as lived.