Virtual World Weariness

On Delaying the Experiental Erosion of Digital Environments

Stefano Gualeni

Introduction

Media and game scholars often approach digital games as artificial systems that disclose specific interactive situations and scenarios to their players. For instance, Ian Bogost[1], Paolo Pedercini[2], and Riccardo Fassone[3] have characterized such situations and scenarios, in respect to the possibilities with which they can be experienced and manipulated, as inherently limited. In their respective works, these three authors frequently focus on the spatial and operational limits afforded by virtual environments. The way those limitations are set, they argue, is one of the most definitive characteristics of this media form—and can even reveal the designers' ideological stances.

Aligned with the philosophical traditions of phenomenology and existentialism, in this chapter I will use the term "world" to indicate a group of beings (along with their individual properties and mutual relationships) understood as a unified set. In order for this set of "somethings" to be rec-

1 | Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

2 | Paolo Pedercini, "Invisible walls, puffy clouds, and the unheavenly world behind them," *blog post* (April 1, 2014) http://www.molleindustria.org/blog/invisible-walls-puffy-clouds/ (accessed April 24, 2019).

3 | Riccardo Fassone, *Every Game is an Island: Endings and Extremities in Video Games* (USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

ognized as a world by a subject, it is necessary for that subject to be able to establish an interactive and mutually-constitutive relationship with those somethings. Moreover, when worlds are experienced, they must, to a degree, be able to be perceived persistently and they must be consistent behaviorally (that is, the condition in which they are intelligible must be stable).[4] This interpretation of world is not only concise and widely applicable, but it also allows me to establish what I consider to be a useful distinction between being *in* a world and what we *experience* during dreams, hallucinatory states, or dissociative events (such as mild daydreams or when immersed in literary fiction). "Virtual worlds" are thus understood as particular kinds of relationships that can be established with digital environments. These virtual worlds disclose artificial and often extra-ordinary[5] horizons of possibilities for both doing and experiencing.

As described in the first paragraph, the inherent artificiality of virtual environments is also understood as a guarantee of their finitude and limitedness. The qualities and affordances discussed in this chapter are not exclusive to digital game spaces, but characterize practices and interactions that take place in a variety of world-disclosing technologies.[6]

---

4 | Stefano Gualeni, *Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools: How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 6.

5 | In this context, adjective "extra-ordinary" corresponds to its etymological origin, indicating something that transcends the ordinary, an experience that goes beyond one's everyday identity and customary relationship with the actual world.

6 | In his 1990 book *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), American philosopher of science and technology Don Ihde presented his understanding of the implications of technologies by analyzing the ways in which they contribute to how reality can be experienced and interpreted by human beings. Among the four kinds of human-technology relations he discusses, the third—that of "alterity relations"—is specifically relevant to this discussion. In alterity relations, according to Ihde, technologies do not filter or enhance our capabilities for interaction and perception, but are the very terminus of our experience. These technologies give their users access to artificial contexts for experience and interaction, while the everyday world—not playing an active role in this relationship—remains in the background. Common examples of alterity relations include getting money from an ATM or playing a digital game.

In light of this observation, it becomes relevant to ask why this chapter specifically focuses its attention on digital games and on their inevitable (spatial) boundedness.

First and foremost, the core of my argument as to why video game environments are particularly relevant topics of investigation lies in their being experientially configured and encountered as worlds. The artificial and interactive spaces of digital games—as worlds—allow us to play with (and around) their affordances and their technical limitations, and to extract meaning and pleasure from both of them. It is especially noteworthy that—in several languages, including English—the term "play" does not only signify an enjoyable, non-serious activity, but it also indicates the limited space in which a mechanism can move and perform its operations. From this standpoint, the creators of any kinds of virtual worlds can be recognized as holding a position of power in relation to their audience, as the former largely configure the "possibility space" of "play" for the latter.[7]

7 | I consider it necessary to add the adverb "largely" to this sentence, as the possibility space of a virtual world cannot be deemed as uniquely determined by the intentions of programmers, designers, or creative directors. It inevitably involves a degree of compromise with what the players know about the virtual world in question, which beliefs they have about it, and what the players desire to do within it. For developers, it is not always possible to predict, determine, and restrain players' aspirations and actions. Digital game glitch-runs and their "modding" are especially persuasive examples of how our relationship with those virtual worlds is effectively a negotiation, and not an imposition. The same can be said of various approaches to play that overtly rebel against the functional intentions and implicit ideologies that structure game worlds. Transgressive approaches to game rules, game affordances, and game conventions are recognized as forms of social subversion in the works of several authors, notably including Espen Aarseth and Mary Flanagan. From their theoretical standpoint, subversive play is an important cultural tool that stimulates independent critical thought, self-reflection, and promotes social change (Aarseth 2007; Flanagan 2009). To quote Fassone on this same point, the rigid borders of a game's formal structure "do not prevent playing from being an intrinsically transformative, interpretative and ideological act." Riccardo Fassone, *Every Game Is an Island: Borders, Endings, Extremities in Video Games* (Doctoral the-

A common understanding of the role of a game developer involves establishing (or at least partially establishing) what is interactively and perceptually available in (video)game environments: which elements and behaviors those worlds include and allow, and what is—instead—omitted from their "possibility horizon." This term references the ancient Greek origin of the word horizon, ὅρος (*oros*), which denotes a frontier—a spatial limit. Constructed on this etymological foundation, "horizon" is used here to indicate the spatial and operational boundaries that a (video)game environment affords its players.

Virtual World Weariness

This chapter presents notions and ideas that originally emerged in the context of my practical involvement with video games, both as a player and as a designer. I will begin by discussing a particular feeling that emerged as a result of my playful encounters with the possibility horizons of video games, as described in the previous section. In doing so, I am referring to the realization that—as a player—a gaming environment can be experientially exhausted and, as such, is ultimately banal. In other words, I examine how our deliberate engagement with the interactive environments of digital games can trigger sensations that are analogous to what Romantic authors referred to as *Weltschmerz*, or "world-weariness."

The Romantic idea of *Weltschmerz* can be understood as being almost exactly antithetical to the concept of the "sublime" embraced during the same period.[8] Much of the Romantic sublime focused on the awe-inspiring vastness of nature, and the impossibility of the human senses and human intellect to ever grasp its size and meaning—yet to someone experiencing the phenomenon of *Weltschmerz*, the world appears to be meaningless and dissatisfactory.[9] Whereas the Romantic poets found themselves inadequate and fragile, in relation to a sense of the sublime that transcended their perceptual and intellective capabilities, this contrasting

sis discussed at the department of humanistic studies of the University of Turin, Turin, Italy, 2013), 30.

8 | See: Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

9 | Wilhelm Alfred Braun, *Types of Weltschmerz in German Poetry* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1905).

sense of world-weariness is closely related to the feeling of hopelessness, even boredom; it is the realization that our experiences of a world make us progressively more aware of the impossibility of transcendence.[10] Aligned with these interpretations, this chapter uses *Weltschmerz* to indicate the sensation that a certain world is inadequate to satisfy our intellectual and emotional aspirations.[11]

There are many aspects of our relationships with digital games that can elicit (or be accompanied by) feelings of world-weariness. In analogy with actual-world weariness, a dissatisfaction and the boredom with digital game environments emerges from aspects of their finitude and banality. The most common among these "world-pains" are the players' direct encounters with the game's spatial boundaries (tall walls, invisible barriers, puffy clouds, cliffs, fences, etc.). Other frequent triggers of "virtual" *Weltschmerz* are, for example, recognition of the aesthetic repetitions of game textures and assets (buildings, trees, statues, textures, characters, etc.), and the recurrence of interactive patterns and in-game situations (the dreary routine of "grinding," the ceaseless repetition of the same lines in dialogue with non-player-character, the very un-surprising occurrence of surprise encounters, etc.).[12]

10 | Paul Martin provided a similar reflection on the sublimity and the domestication of video game spaces in 2011. In his article "The Pastoral and the Sublime in Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion" (*Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, Vol. 11, No. 3), Martin identified the "sublime" (a concept involving nuances of immensity, incalculability, and danger) and the "pastoral" (for the familiar and non-threatening) as two successive moments of our experiential relationship with a certain video game space.

11 | In a way that resonates with this interpretation of "world-weariness," Norwegian existential philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe clarified that "[m]an is a tragic animal. Not because of his smallness, but because he is too well endowed. Man has longings and spiritual demands that reality cannot fulfill. We have expectations of a just and moral world. Man requires meaning in a meaningless world" (*The Philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe in his 90th Year*, Tromsø: Original Films AS, 1990).

12 | The notion that the world-weariness of artificial environments can be mitigated by pursuing aesthetic variety and breaking the repetition of modules might be interesting to apply to the actual world. For instance, the application of principles and ideas presented in this paper to modular and repetitive

Some of the recent work by game scholar Sebastian Möring focuses on the sense of boredom and meaninglessness that emerges when the challenges that are present in a game world have been overcome or removed, and all enemies have been defeated.[13] Experiencing such a virtual world can, by definition, trigger the feeling of weariness discussed above, as significant parts of its meaning and appeal have already been effectively done-away with (or played-away with). This is especially true regarding what are known as "games of progression",[14] in which a ludic setup affords and invites the defeating and removing of challenges and enemies as their *raison d'être*. Accordingly, I have suggested elsewhere that perhaps the only possibility for something extra-ordinary (and to a degree, transcendent) to happen within virtual environments is found when we experience glitches. By this, I mean our interactive encounters with non-catastrophic malfunctions of computer software or hardware that are recognizably anomalous.[15]

If it is evident to us—as players—that the experience of empty, repetitive, and bounded environments is a crucial trigger for virtual *Weltschmerz*, then it is equally clear that the designers and developers of digital games have an interest in keeping their audience from experiencing this particular kind of dissatisfaction. As a consequence, the most common design techniques aimed at delaying the emergence of virtual world-weariness involve making those triggers as inconspicuous and difficult to encounter as possible. A very obvious example of this design objective is the fact that the literal horizons of digital game environments often appear as aesthetic or thematic illusions of distant lands, buildings, cities, islands, planets, and star systems that exist at the periphery of our

architectural designs, such as those commonly characterizing public housing and rationalist city-planning, is one possibility of doing so.

13 | Sebastian Möring, "On the Relation of Boredom and Care in Computer Game Play from an Existential Ludological Perspective," *Brandenburg Center for Media Studies*, Ludic Boredom Workshop unpublished conference proceedings (Potsdam: Jun 1, 2018).

14 | Jesper Juul, "The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression," in *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings*, ed. F. Mäyrä (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2002), pp. 323–29.

15 | See: Stefano Gualeni, "On the de-familiarizing and re-framing effects of glitches and glitch-alikes," in *Conference proceedings of the DiGRA International Conference: Game, Play, and the Emergent Ludo Mix* (Kyoto: August 6-10, 2019).

vision, and cannot be reached or examined closely. Similar strategies of unknowability or concealing the spatial boundaries of virtual worlds also include presenting them to the player in ways that make contextual sense within the fictional setting of a certain environment: to represent them as parts of the environment that are intuitively impossible to overcome, inaccessible, or obviously deadly. Among the most common ways to give fictional meaning and to disguise the spatial limits of digital games are precipitous mountain ridges, impassable lakes of magma, cliffs, broken bridges, tall walls, electrified fences, endless stretches of water, and so on and so forth. Other strategies to prevent the experiential encounter with a virtual space's borders and boundaries involve creating game spaces that have "periodic boundary conditions" (worlds that wrap onto themselves, as if they enfolded a sphere). This is the case, for example, in the classic arcade game *Asteroids* (1979). Yet another approach for making the spatial boundaries of a video game impossible to actually be experienced as boundaries is progressively generating new (coherent and playable) content, as the players move beyond spaces that were previously visited. For example, Mojang's *Minecraft* (2009), CCP's *EVE Online* (2003), and Hello Games' *No Man's Sky* (2016) utilize this technique.

As indicated by the title of this book chapter, my objective in this text is to identify and discuss game design approaches and solutions that delay the experiential erosion of digital environments. As such, I will now specifically focus on the spatiality of virtual environments, and on ways designers can deal with their artificiality and their consequent finitude. I will pursue this objective by reflecting upon my own practical experience as a video game designer, as well as in structured discussions with scholars and independent video game developers. Their primary design work lies in combatting the emergence of world-weariness as described above. The interviewees for this essay were (in alphabetical order):

- Mike Cook—Independent video game developer and game researcher (http://www.gamesbyangelina.org)
- Mark R. Johnson—Game studies scholar and independent video game developer of *Ultima Ratio Regum* (https://www.markrjohnsongames.com/games/ultima-ratio-regum)
- Antonios Liapis—Researcher in the field of procedural video game content generation (http://www.antoniosliapis.com)
- Niccolò Tedeschi—Artist and game developer at *Santa Ragione*, inde-

pendent video game development team of *Foto*nica (http://www.fotonica-game.com) and Mirrormoon EP (http://www.mirrormoongame.com)

On Delaying the Experiential Erosion of Digital Environments

Emphasizing a particular kind of existential dissatisfaction that manifests itself in digital environments, researcher and developer Mike Cook argued in our interview for this essay that "we dream of doing and being a particular thing in a world, and then we find ourselves unable to do it. It is a typical 21st century condition—to be trying our hardest to escape into a digital world and then realize that we cannot act in the way we wanted. It is almost like being in a nightmare where one is unable to move one's arms, or to speak." Interestingly, for Cook, our weariness has less to do with the granularity of the environment in question and more with its regularity: the more familiar we become with a certain world and its logics, the less interesting and surprising this world becomes, progressively losing any sense of the sublime. In our dicussion, Cook focused his attention on the repetition and the modularity of elements in digital environments—aesthetic components of the experience of a game world that are particularly problematic for someone like himself, who aspires to generate interesting, playable environments algorithmically. Over time, he argued, "we become numb to the patterns inherent in the algorithms that constitute the world."

Solutions to this problem in particular were widely shared by all of the developers and researchers I interviewed. Everyone recommended, for example, intentional masking of or creating breaks in computer-generated patterns (through procedural content generation), and authored content (or custom elements directly designed by humans). The rationale behind this stance is that the integration of procedural content through custom-generated assets can trick the human brain into misinterpreting the complexity of a computer generator, and overestimate the aesthetic variety and experiential richness of a digital environment. "The player builds a mental model of how content is generated in a certain world," Cook explained:

[...] and then they encounter something that does not fit that model. Their assumption that the [custom] content comes from the same algorithm that generated the rest of the world prompts them to re-evaluate their initial mental model, and in this way, their respect and interest for that world erodes a little slower.

Additional ways to mask the regularities and the repetitions of procedurally generated content in virtual environments that were discussed by my interviewees include:

- adding "noise" to pre-designed game content; that is, allowing a generator to introduce small aesthetic and functional variations to existing game modules in order to make it harder for the players to recognize them as something already "known" (this is the case, among others, with *Mossmouth*'s video game *Spelunky* (2013);
- giving the players the possibility and tools to modify, destroy, or reconstruct shared virtual environments. In his interview for this essay, Liapsis explained that these tools allow the players to provide additional complexity and experiential richness to interactive, digital spaces that—because of this—inevitably feel less artificial and more "lived";
- using data from the internet to both disguise procedurally generated patterns and to allow a digital environment to increase the feeling of "real-world" by referencing actual current events;
- erasing all the saved states and information about a world when a game session ends. According to what Johnson argued in his interview for this essay, losing information and access to a world as well as the civilizations that inhabited it, its undiscovered religions and tales, and its unvisited lands after a game is over not only makes it harder to reverse-engineer the ways in which that world was generated, but can also trigger a lingering feeling of mystery about it.

In addition to the virtual *Weltschmerz* elicited by experientially encountering the boundaries of virtual worlds, and the stale repetition of spatial as well as interactive patterns, both Tedeschi and Johnson recognized a third trigger for world-weariness that is common in contemporary video games: the fact that events in virtual worlds are often inconsistent with their narrative (or more widely thematic) context. The experience of contextual dissonance emerges from the need that game developers have to constantly negotiate their creative and expressive aspirations with the technical and

functional limitations imposed by the technologies with which they design. As players, according to both Tedeschi and Johnson, we are constantly (and painfully) comparing virtual experiences with actual ones (which are considered our "phenomenological bedrock"), and we are also measuring the former against the backdrop of established expressive forms, their genres and canons. Tedeschi clarified this point with a particularly poignant example, stating that:

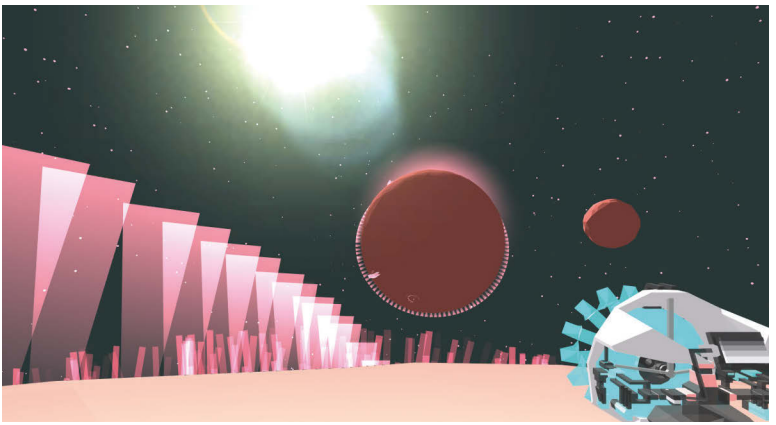
> [...] in *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), a videogame that amply borrows its themes and aesthetics from the Western movie genre, it is possible to walk into various saloons and engage non-player characters in a game of poker. What I am about to discuss resonates with the representations of the American Old West that we are all more or less familiar with: I am in a saloon playing poker in the world of *Red Dead Redemption*. After a few hands, I have almost lost all of my money and so—while the game is still ongoing—I decide to stand up, shoot all of the other players, and walk out with all the money. Once I have killed all of the other players, however, no money is to be found on their bodies or on the table where we were playing. Apparently, *Red Dead Redemption* treats the game at the poker table as a technically separate instance of the world, rather than a part of it. My actions, which were completely consistent with what has been established in the Western genre, are not acknowledged by the game. At that point, that world revealed its artificial constitution and lost its "worldliness" for me...to a point that everything from that point on felt phony and pointless.

In response to the problem of thematic inconsistency, Tedeschi and Johnson each suggested design solutions that the creators of interactive, digital environments could start to employ with today's technologies and tools. Tedeschi argued that the kind of contextual dissonance that he diagnosed could be avoided by setting up worlds that do not reference the actual one. Referring to *Santa Ragione*'s design for *Mirrormoon EP* (2013), they tried:

> to propose a very abstract experience in terms of narration, interaction and aesthetics. The world of *Mirrormoon EP* is never wholly defined: it is an open world, a minimal world that is simply 'suggested' to the player. This 'openness' might not be the final solution to the problem of thematic inconsistency, but I think it goes in the right direction; that is, letting the players interpret what they encounter rather than pre-determining for them how a world is to be understood on the

basis of previous, common experiences. This could be understood as a Duchampian approach to game design: *ce sont les regardeurs qui font les tableaux*.

Fig. 70: Santa Ragione, screenshot of Mirrormoon EP exemplifying the minimal, procedurally-generated features of their explorable content, 2013



Discussing the same problem, specifically in relation to procedurally generated environments, Johnson foresaw developments and new techniques that could ensure the emergence of more believable and coherent worlds. Johnson, who pioneered some of those techniques himself in his game *Ultima Ratio Regum* (2012), insisted that part of the solution consists in striving to generate all the components of a virtual world in an interconnected fashion, such that each aspect natively relates to every other aspect. It is relatively easy, wrote Johnson:

[...] to make a generator that spits out Game-of-Thrones-esque names for cities like Wolfweald, or Queen's Throne, or Dragonlance, or whatever...But the real challenge is making those generated things ‚percolate' through the remainder of that world, reflecting in everything: from how people speak to what they wear, how they act, what their history is, et cetera.

Conclusions

Beyond contributing fitting comments on the design and procedural generation of less "painful" worlds to this chapter, Liapis mentioned something that I consider worthy of particular attention in his interview; something with which—in the cautionary spirit that is typical of the concluding sections of many literary works—I would like to close this essay. In response to one of my questions—or, rather, as an amendment to it—Liapis called my attention to the fact that it would be paradoxical to think of our sense of unease and dissatisfaction in video games as simply meaning that we would instead prefer to pursue any task in the actual world. He did not believe that we would, say, rather go do laundry or grocery shopping than explore enchanted kingdoms in a high-fantasy game world. Although he admitted having experienced the feeling of virtual world-weariness—which he considered not only common, but inherent to how we currently design and experience video game worlds—Liapis pointed out that his way of coping with virtual *Weltschmerz* does not revolve around the idea of "returning to the actual." He argued that his way of dealing with the kind of *Weltschmerz* induced by a digital game usually involve starting to play a new game: beginning to explore a new environment, experiencing a new possibility horizon, and a new promise of happiness and satisfaction. To be sure, Liapis appeared to be well-aware that these ambitions cannot be fulfilled by the systemic artificiality of contemporary digital technologies—or perhaps even at all. However, he seemed equally dissatisfied with the prospect of considering actual experiences the answer to our shared malcontent with virtual ones.

I do not mean to imply—in this essay or elsewhere—that the actual world can ultimately satisfy and complete us, or that our aspirations can finally obtain an adequate response through our experiential relationship with it. Beyond the Romantic era, with its plethora of examples as to why that might not be the case, ancient Greek tragedies as well as the artistic and philosophical currents of Existentialism and Absurdism also stand as historical landmarks for Western culture's awareness of the meaninglessness of our existential struggle in this world. What I propose in this essay is the idea that *all* worlds (regardless of their virtual or actual constitution) are ultimately absurd, and that technologies cannot be expected to fix the inevitably boring, painful, and even tragic dimensions of our existence. Digital environments are, I argue, better understood as existential tools:

not as contexts in which we pursue complete happiness and satisfaction, but as instruments that allow us to negotiate various aspects of our (individual as well as collective) existence, in new and unexpected guises.

Regarding this standpoint, a human being cannot be understood as existentially "solvable"—nor is it possible to be completed and satisfied—by technological means. This is not simply a problem with current technologies or our mastery of them; we are constitutively bound to dissatisfaction, and inherently driven to explore and experiment with new worlds and unfamiliar possibilities of being. Virtual environments, in their peculiar ways, arguably provide those experiences and possibilities. In doing so, they contribute to our existential struggle, both allowing us to transcend some aspects of our everyday relationship with the actual world, and in disclosing new ways in which our very incompleteness can be experienced and understood.