EDITED BY

MARK GRIMSHAW

The Oxford Handbook *of* VIRTUALITY

AN AFTERWORD IN FOUR BINARISMS

TOM BOELLSTORFF

The 44 chapters comprising this handbook defy easy categorization or even summation. The topics their authors address, as well as the methods and conceptual apparatuses they bring to bear, vary so greatly that any attempt at a unified conclusion would obfuscate more than it would reveal. In place of such a misguided quest I here provide an afterword in four binarisms that capture key insights and tensions running through the constituent chapters of this handbook. These resonate with my own research agendas (see Boellstorff 2008; 2011a) and the ethnographic research that has been one valuable approach to exploring these agendas (as detailed in *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*, Boellstorff et al. 2012, and the work of my coauthors Bonnie Nardi (2010), Celia Pearce (2006), and T.L. Taylor (2009)).

My turn to dualisms as analytical trope reflects my appreciation for the place of discreteness in the constitution of the digital, at its base a combination of 1s and 0s (Boellstorff 2012). Dualism is not the invention of René Descartes, Christianity and its opposition of Word and Flesh, Daoism and its opposition of yin and yang, or any other such historical specificity. Dualism is a foundational feature of all human languages, indeed of information as such and even the quantum mechanics whose discrete entities undergird the real. At issue is not the transcendence or dissolution of dualism but its deontologization—recognizing its contingency and emergence, and thus its vulnerability to deconstruction and reconfiguration. It is in this spirit that I proffer the following binarisms as points of entry for reconsidering virtuality.

One: Reality and World

When it comes to the question of the virtual as it relates to technology, one of the most fundamental sources of confusion involves virtual reality versus virtual world. So often

we are talking past each other, one interlocutor discussing virtual reality while the other expounds on virtual worlds. "Virtual reality" focuses attention on perception and the individual body. It raises questions of goggles and gloves, sight and sound, touch and taste and smell. The virtuality in question is one of immersion and presence in terms of sensory input.

The notion of "virtual world" refers to something very different. At issue here are online places that persist even as individuals enter and leave them. These online places need not require the sensory immersion of virtual reality interfaces. Early virtual worlds were based solely on text, and a few still are. Most contemporary virtual worlds have beautiful graphics and dynamic sound, but few seek to extend further into the sensorium; even with regard to vision and hearing, sensory immersion is rarely the goal. Most participants are happy with desktop, laptop, or even mobile device screens that do not surround them in terms of the senses.

The crucial kind of presence with regard to virtual worlds is social presence: the ability to be copresent with social others, not all of them necessarily human (some can be computer-controlled characters). Such copresence is linked to the place-ness of virtual worlds. This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that asynchronic sociality is important in most virtual worlds. Because virtual worlds are places, it is, for instance, possible for me to start work on a building, log off, and then for you to log in and continue working collaboratively on the building even though I am not there. Note that this kind of asynchronic social presence could take place in a text-only virtual world and has very little to do with the notion of virtual reality. Virtual reality is always about synchronic engagement: a sensory stimulus or response now, in the present moment.

Just how far the "virtual" of virtual reality is from the "virtual" of virtual worlds is illustrated by the fact that virtual reality does not even need the Internet. You can put on a set of virtual reality goggles linked by wires to a camera a volunteer carries around a room. In contrast, few scholarly or everyday understandings of "virtual world" would include a computer-generated place that existed only on one computer and ceased to be whenever that computer was turned off, even if that place had avatars. Histories of virtual worlds typically begin with text-based Multi User Domains (MUDs) that had no pretension to virtual reality whatsoever. What they had was place-ness (not just a sense of place) and social immersion made possible through an Internet connection, even at "dial-up" speeds.

Science fiction and other works of artistic imagination have often anticipated aspects of virtual reality and virtual worlds, and have even played demonstrable roles in their design. However, science fiction is not always a reliable guide to empirical reality. One way in which this has been the case has been with regard to the conflation and thus confusion of virtual reality and virtual worlds. *The Matrix* trilogy of movies is an influential exemplar. In these films, virtual reality—full sensory immersion via being "plugged in" while prone in a chair, oblivious to the physical world—is coupled with a virtual world, the "Matrix" itself, which appears as a modern urban environment. Here, virtual reality is assumed to be the method for accessing a virtual world. One does not imagine Neo

holding up an iPad and swiping his fingers across the screen to engage in fisticuffs with his evil opponent.

The reality, of course, is that the domains of virtual reality and virtual world are more like a Venn diagram, with only a slight overlap. Most virtual reality devices are not about virtual worlds, and most virtual worlds do not make use of virtual reality devices. It is possible to use virtual reality technologies to access virtual worlds, but this seems to be of limited interest, for instance military and medical uses. Even in the domain of online gaming, where sensory immersion might seem attractive, there is little evidence for a significant interest in virtual reality technologies, but rather new frontiers of "augmented reality" that overlay the virtual and the actual without resolving them into one. Binarisms persist. This has significant import for any understanding of "virtuality," because it indicates that we are not talking about a single concept. We will often be making apples-and-oranges arguments when talking about the virtual if we assume that both virtual reality and virtual worlds lie within our analytical purview. In other cases we may indeed be hitting on elements of the virtual common to virtual reality and virtual worlds, but this cannot be presumed at the outset.

Two: Unreal and Real

These confusions regarding the relatively minor overlap between "virtual reality" and "virtual world"—and thus the divergent notions of virtuality in play—relate directly to the second binarism under discussion, that of "real" versus what I will provisionally term the "unreal." The deeply flawed opposition between virtual and real, with the concomitant narrative they are increasingly "blurring," remains the single biggest conceptual impediment to a more robust and accurate understanding of virtuality. The opposition between virtual and real is a normative move that a priori consigns the virtual to the domain of unreality. It undermines the legitimacy and value of research on virtuality and can imply a romantic notion of reality that has no Internet in it—or no computers in it, or even no technology in it.

What constitutes the "real" when placed in a dichotomous relationship with the virtual is rarely consistent or clear. There is of course a longstanding and vibrant interdisciplinary body of work addressing questions of the real. This work can draw from notions of ideal form in a Platonic tradition, or notions of brute physicality. It can draw from Lacanian notions of a supposedly universal stage of human development, or Marxist notions of an economic base. Philip K. Dick, one of the most astute science fiction authors, famously defined reality as "that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away" (Dick 1985, 3).

The problem is that no matter what definition of "the real" you use, there is no way to exclude virtuality and particularly virtual worlds without caricaturing the virtual as always already fantastical, unproductive, and inconsequential. Yet we see aptly demonstrated a range of fascinating ways that virtuality has social consequences, online and

offline. This compels us to continue the theoretical and empirical work of investigating the ontological status of the virtual, and thereby the ontological status of what is often termed the actual or physical. But all this, online or offline, is real in some fashion, and unreality—however defined—is not exclusive to the virtual.

One factor contributing to these confusions involves the category mistake of taking a subset of activities that occur within a virtual context as indicative of virtuality writ large. For instance, one of the most popular uses of virtual worlds is for gaming, as can be seen by online games like *World of Warcraft*. When the broad appeal of such games is taken to indicate unreality (often coupled with the suggestion that the gamers in question "get a life"), two levels of misconstrual result. First, as noted by Richard Bartle, a pioneer in the development of virtual worlds, "virtual worlds are not games. Even the ones written to *be* games aren't games. People can play games *in* them, sure, and they can be set up to that end, but this merely makes them venues. The Pasadena Rose Bowl is a stadium, not a game" (Bartle 2004, 475, emphasis in original). Second, using the existence of games to diagnose unreality ignores how games are consequential and very "real" aspects of all human cultures. Similarly, the fact that forms of drama, playacting, and role-playing take place in some virtual worlds does not make them unreal—first, because these activities do not take place in all virtual worlds, and second, because such activities are part of social reality. All told, then, there is a need for rethinking the relationship of the real not just to technology but also to representation, social construction, and production. Reconsidering the binarism of real and unreal will thus provide us with a better conceptual framework for apprehending the consequentiality of virtuality itself.

Three: Emic and Etic

A third binarism central to current tensions and debates over virtuality involves the distinction between what anthropologists term emic (insider) versus etic (outsider) concepts, a terminology first developed by the philosopher Kenneth Pike on the model of the linguistic distinction between phonemic and phonetic analysis (see Geertz 1983, 56–57). It often happens that an etic term will become emic over time. "Homosexual," for instance, was an etic term originating from the mid-nineteenth-century world of sexology but later became an emic term, such that individuals could say, "I am homosexual" (Boellstorff 2011b). Emic terms can also become etic: a convenient parallel example is "gay," which began as insider slang but has since become a term of psychological theory. Both these examples illustrate how some concepts can be simultaneously emic and etic.

Such multiplicity of emic and etic definition is a hallmark of "virtual." Unlike, say, "asynchronic" or "ontological," "virtual" is an everyday term. In colloquial English it can mean "almost," as in "we are virtually home." It now also can act as a synonym for "online." Everyday notions of "virtual world" are typically not informed by a Deleuzeian opposition to the actual, nor by a concern with potentiality or becoming: the reference

is usually simply to a place you go to online that looks three-dimensional and where you can play a game or shop. Additionally, while many Internet-related terms globalize and become loanwords in other languages, this does not always happen, and of course a "loanword" takes on new meanings over time.

For researchers, designers, and participants, a crucial area for clarification and conversation involves ambiguities as to whether we are using "virtual" as an etic or emic term, and also the existence of multiple etic and emic definitions. Nor is this issue unique to the notion of virtuality: "real" and "game" are also examples of terms used in emic and etic senses, with multiple definitions in both cases. Even the notions of "immersion" and "presence" are not immune from these dynamics. In all these cases, the existence of multiple definitions is not necessarily a problem to be resolved. It may accurately reflect the reality of multiple cultural logics, multiple modalities and platforms for online engagement, and multiple communities of scholarly practice.

At issue here is not just matters of terminological precision, important as those are, but matters of perspectival knowledge. The study of online culture is often marked by a slippage between the descriptive and the proscriptive, from the analysis of what is, to claims regarding what someone thinks should be. Such slippages are enabled by slippages between the emic and etic. Proscriptive recommendations are certainly legitimate—they are in fact necessary to everything from design to activism. Etic analysis is valid as well, for while it is important that researchers be able to write in multiple voices and genres for multiple audiences, outsider analyses written primarily for one's research community have much to offer. To push forward the conversation on virtuality, however, it is vital to be clear as to when we are speaking in emic or etic terms, and to value descriptive, emic theorizations of the virtual before rushing to a proscriptive or normative mode. It is exciting to see the many careful lines of inquiry in formation that engage with these varied modes of apprehending virtuality.

Four: Utopia and Dystopia

The forms of prescription and normative judgment discussed above with regard to insider versus outsider perspectives are aspects of the fourth and final binarism I will discuss, that of utopia and dystopia. As an anthropologist I am trained to regard claims of human universals with suspicion, for all too often they turn out to be the thinly disguised lifeways and perspectives of those in power. Yet we cannot allow such healthy skepticism to imply we can only talk about locality, not least because localities can be predicated on hegemonies of their own. With regard to virtuality, it is worth attending to the fact that while the pattern is not a rigid universal, it is certainly the case that, throughout human history, emerging technologies have been met with simultaneous narratives of utopia and dystopia. An exemplary body of scholarship has shown how new technologies tend not to be interpreted neutrally, but rather as potentially bringing great good—even saving humanity—or as harbingers of destruction and oppression.

Indeed, the relative subsidence of such utopian and dystopian narratives often indicates that a technology is no longer seen as such, but has become a mundane tool for living.

We are on the threshold of new banalities of virtuality: the embedding of virtuality into everyday life. This banalization and new ubiquity for the virtual does not mean that everything will become augmentation, and virtual worlds will disappear. Nor does it mean that virtual worlds will become dominant and we will live our lives jacked into fantasy landscapes. Against the tendency of some thinkers and "evangelists" to posit lockstep stages and rigid timelines, reality usually moves in many directions at once. For instance, while highly immersive virtual worlds will certainly continue, we are already seeing the rise of virtual worlds that are integrated into social networking sites (as Cloud Party is integrated with Facebook). The avatarization of the self (which appears not just in avatars narrowly conceived, but in things like a Facebook homepage) will be transformed as the "personal cloud" emerges as a central form of aggregate online selfhood.

At the risk of sounding obvious, we will see continuity and change, augmentation and immersion. We will see uses of the virtual that we can deem detrimental—addictive, callous, crassly commercial, bigoted, and cruel. We will see uses of the virtual that we can deem beneficial—liberating, community-building, self-transforming, and challenging of established hierarchies and centers of power. We will continue rediscovering that these questions of benefit or detriment cannot be absolutely associated with any particular technological configuration; they are rather the products of social action—what we do with the technologies in their design, experience, and unexpected hackings and repurposings. It is thus in our engagement with technology and social action that we can better understand virtuality in its past formations and present-day dynamics—and work toward better futures.

References

Bartle, R. A. 2004. *Designing Virtual Worlds*. Indianapolis, IN: New Riders.

Boellstorff, T. 2008. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Boellstorff, T. 2011a. Placing the Virtual Body: Avatar, Chora, Cypherg. In *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment*, edited by Frances E. Mascia-Lees, 504–520. New York: Wiley-Blackwell.

Boellstorff, T. 2011b. But Do Not Identify as Gay: A Proleptic Genealogy of the MSM Category. *Cultural Anthropology* 26(2): 287–312.

Boellstorff, T. 2012. Rethinking Digital Anthropology. In *Digital Anthropology*, edited by H. A. Horst and D. Miller, 39–60. London: Berg.

Boellstorff, T., B. Nardi, C. Pearce, and T. L. Taylor. 2012. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Dick, P. K. 1985. How to Build a Universe That Doesn't Fall Apart Two Days Later. In *I Hope I Shall Arrive Soon*, 1–23. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Geertz, C. 1983. "From the Native's Point of View": On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding. In *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, 55–72. New York: Basic Books.

Nardi, B. 2010. *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Pearce, C. 2009. *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Online Games and Virtual Worlds*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Taylor, T. L. 2006. *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press.