

Philosophical and ethical aspects of virtual worlds

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“In the future, people are not just going to live one life; they will be able to live multiple, parallel lives in different universes and even have different identities. The phrase ‘you can be whatever or whoever you want’ takes on a whole new meaning in the Metaverse – you can be a businessperson, professional athlete or doctor.”

Rosa, 2023, p. 41





Computers in Human Behavior

Volume 63, October 2016, Pages 683-693



Full length article

Virtual gossip: How gossip regulates moral life in virtual worlds

Katleen Gabriels^a  , Charlotte J.S. De Backer^b 

 Available access | Research article | First published online June 18, 2013

Morality and involvement in social virtual worlds: The intensity of moral emotions in response to virtual versus real life cheating

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Outline

1. **Conceptual muddle**
2. **Four conceptualisations of virtuality**
3. **Pressing ethical concerns**

1. Conceptual muddle

Mixed Reality (MR)

“we conducted interviews with ten AR/VR experts from academia and industry, as well as a literature survey of 68 papers. We find that, while there are prominent examples, there is no universally agreed on, one-size-fits-all definition of MR.”

Speicher, Hall, & Nebeling, 2019, p. 1

“Many see MR as a synonym for AR. Some consider MR strictly according to the definition given by Milgram & Kishino, i.e., a superset of AR in terms of a “mix of real and virtual objects within a single display.” Yet, others consider MR distinct from AR in the sense that MR enables walking into, and manipulating, a scene whereas AR does not. Some do not even attempt, or want, to specify what MR is.”

Speicher, Hall, & Nebeling, 2019, p. 1

Metaverse

“definitions of the Metaverse have not yet stabilized. Many mutually exclusive metaphors, explanations, and claims exist in parallel. For instance, it is unclear whether a metaverse is already existing, currently emerging, or only possible in the future”

Dolata & Schwabe, 2023, p. 246

“The most comprehensive review of definitions of the Metaverse—by [Park and Kim \(2022\)](#)—consider 54 definitions developed between 2000 and 2022. In their analysis, the Metaverse is primarily defined as a place, a space, or a world—highlighting its physical dimension. Park and Kim define the Metaverse as “a three-dimensional virtual world where avatars engage in political, economic, social, and cultural activities” ([Park and Kim, 2022](#), p. 4211)”

Dolata & Schwabe, 2023, p. 242

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IY4x85zqoJM>

Spatial Computing, Metaverse, or MR?

Apple Vision Pro seamlessly blends digital content with your physical space.

So you can work, watch, relive memories, and connect in ways never before possible.

The era of spatial computing is here.

<https://www.apple.com/apple-vision-pro/>

TECH

Meta is hoping Apple's Vision Pro can help save the metaverse

Beatrice Nolan Jan 30, 2024, 12:30 PM CET

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<https://www.businessinsider.com/meta-apple-vision-pro-launch-metaverse-mixed-reality-mark-zuckerberg-2024-1?international=true&r=US&IR=T>

What is Apple Vision Pro? When mixed-reality headset will be available in UK

The mixed-reality headset allows users to blend real and virtual worlds

<https://inews.co.uk/news/technology/when-apple-vision-pro-uk-release-date-price-reviews-2887265?srsId=AfmBOoqStL-ijrFne0b4vNT8JmbKffc20sowktjKZSAYu-JJJvMppbwP>

2. Four conceptualisations of virtuality

At its minimum, virtuality has...

- a. A *philosophical (ontological)* conceptualisation;
- b. A *phenomenological* conceptualisation in terms of subjective embodied experience;
- c. A *technological* conceptualisation, e.g., VR, VR technologies;
- d. A *moral* component: a virtual world is a shared virtual space, where humans connect and communicate

a. Ontological: hybridisation and mode of being

- At the end of the 1990s: ontological dualism disproven by empirical research and phenomenological approaches, showing more of a merging (hybridisation) between 'virtual' and 'real' identities
- E.g., Markham (1998): started from a clear-cut dichotomy in her empirical study. Her findings revealed that users conceive virtual experiences as real ones and do not operationalise a dualism. People do not start their 'virtual' lives from a blank slate, as they are always rooted in autobiographical, social, moral, and cultural contexts. **Part of one experienced and ongoing reality.**
- Virtual technology has extended our definition of reality: virtual experiences are real. The virtual as a mode being

b. Phenomenological

- Subjective (first person), embodied, immersive experience
- The virtual self is not a free-floating and bodiless self. Bodies remain rooted in an actual context. Embodiment is a precondition for knowledge, experience, and perception.
- “**Virtual worlds** exist not in the technology used to represent them nor purely in the mind of the user but in the **relationship** between internal mental constructs and technologically generated representations of these constructs” (Reid, 1995, p. 166, my emphasis)

c. Technological

- VR; AR; hardware; software; ... - improved technologies
- In contrast to the early days: now continuous connectivity possible (instead of the physical act of logging in and out)

d. Moral

- Every place, albeit virtual, where embodied moral subjects gather becomes a moral space where people are related to and responsible for others.
 - Early days: No (legal) framework for stalking, hacking; no cyberpolice; ...
 - Online harm easily dismissed in terms of ‘it only took place online’, ‘just go offline’, ‘shut down your computer’, and so on
- Important text: ‘A Rape in Cyberspace, or How an Evil Clown, a Haitian Trickster Spirit, Two Wizards, and a Cast of Dozens Turned a Database into a Society’ (1993)
 - Dibbell’s depiction of the online harm forced Internet researchers to acknowledge the reality status of online experiences

LambdaMOO



3. Pressing ethical concerns

Different realities	Different experiences	Different technologies	Different devices
Physical reality	Social	IoT	VR headsets
VR	Professional	AI (e.g., machine learning)	Laptop
XR	Shopping	Hardware	Tablet
AR	Play	Software	Smartphone
MR	Haptic suits
Spatial computing			...
...			...

Amplify ethical issues
Require different skills

Privacy and personalised intelligence

<https://www.rathenau.nl/nl/digitalisering/immersieve-technologieen>

Rathenau Instituut

- Ownership (license); digital locks (power) versus ‘freedom’
- Manipulation and nudging
- Diversity and inclusion
 - Who has access?
 - Which skills are required (different technologies require different skills)?
 - Who can afford the technology?
 - Quality of technology shapes the subjective experience
- Does the technology offer the solution for a problem?
 - Technosolutionism