Towards a Phenomenological Analysis of Virtual Fictions

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Abstract. This paper presents a phenomenological account of the imagination in its salient features for contemporary discussions concerning virtual reality and computer game experience. As I shall argue, Husserl's conception of the imagination as a distinctive kind of intentionality offers an account that does away with any "representational" relation between the artifact and the imagined object, thus allowing for a genuinely phenomenological account of imaginary objects and their corresponding form of manifestation in experience. In this light, I shall outline a more complex notion of a virtual fictional object. I argue that fictional objects are conglomerate objects, that is, objects constituted in terms of different stratifications of objecthood: perceptual thing, imaginary object, symbol. Lastly, I shall sketch another insight from Husserl's phenomenology of the imagination: the imagination, as a lived experience, is a "fictionalizing" or "virtualizing" of consciousness (and not just its object). The consciousness of the virtual entails a (partial) "virtualization" of consciousness itself.

1.

Over the past decades, the appeal and sophistication of videogames and computer generated virtual environments has steadily grown with spectacular advances in computational power, game design, and programming. The aesthetic and narrative sensibilities of designers and gamers has equally made impressive strides, thus elevating many computer games to the level of aesthetic, cinematic, and literary artifacts of striking quality. In *World of Warcraft*, players create characters along with thousands of other individuals, and interact within the expansive fictional world of Azeroth in pursuit of objectives, increased levels of character talent and abilities, rewards, and

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emotional satisfaction. Whether in the form of MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* or a virtual reality such as Second Life, avatars operate within a fictional and primarily visual world (on screen) generated through complex and evolving social codes, symbolic systems of meaning, economic activity, and emotional and psychological investment. Even if the nomenclature, logic, and culture of any particular game – for example, the wonderfully strange world of *Bioshock* – relates but obliquely to the world of our everyday concerns and experiences, the *basic* kind of experience in video games or virtual reality is familiar to each of us as a fiction lived without conflation of reality.

Given this primacy of the lived experience of fictions, the relative paucity of philosophical reflection on the imagination – without which the experience of fiction is impossible – in the sprawling literature on videogames and virtual reality is striking. The exercise of the imagination is repeatedly acknowledged, yet rarely receives the sustained analysis required for understanding its role in the constitution of simulated realities, interactive fictions, and virtual lives as meaningful lived experiences. A sample of recent studies on virtual reality, or "VR," and videogames attests to this situation.[1] In *How Images Think*, Ron Burnett usefully defines cyber-worlds «as third-person image-spaces, that is, environments that come to participants *as if* they could be converted into first-person experiences through an investment in them»; in *Game Design: Theory and Practice*, Richard Rouse identifies the desire for fantasy as motivating players to «engage in socially unacceptable behavior in a safe environment»; in *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Tom Boellstorff concludes his ethnographic study of Second Life with the proposal that «the ethnography of virtual worlds is, in a sense, the ethnography of the "as if", a state of being in which 'the world of the "unreal" is just as important as the world of the so-called real or actual'».[2] The phenomenon of the "as if" is widely acknowledged *in some form* as an essential dimension of VR and video games, yet in each of the studies just cited one notices a recurring pattern of a *mere* acknowledgment of the centrality of the imagination without an analysis of the imagination. Boellstorff's statement is in this respect revealing: his recognition of the imagination's central role for virtual worlds is entirely mediated through the slim vehicle of a quote from Vaihinger's *Philosophy of the As If*, thus effectively foreclosing the burden of addressing directly and in detail the exercise of the imagination at work in virtual worlds – the stated *primary* object of an ethnography of the "as if."

Even when the role of the imagination is more emphatically acknowledged,

1 I adopt the common shorthand of VR as a blanket term for "cyber-worlds," "virtual reality," "simulated reality," etc.

2 Burnett 2005, p. 94; Rouse 2001, p. 7; Boellstorff 2008, p. 249.

discussions often fail to integrate insights garnered from the relationship between the imagination and VR into a broader theory of the imagination. As a consequence, connections between diverse manifestations of the imagination remain closed to comparative investigation. The immersion of drivers in the virtual lives of their avatars and the virtual worlds of their habitation is a widely recognized aspect of VR. Residents in Second Life routinely form intense emotional and psychological relations with other avatars: the death of an avatar provokes grief within a on-line community; the marriage of two avatars engenders joy, etc. This digital crystallization of intense and empathetic identification can be seen as recalling a comparable *form* of experience with the passionate reception of eighteenth-century epistolary novels. The epistolary novel produced a cultivated intimacy between fictional characters and flesh-and-blood readers, fostering intense emotional and psychological investments with the fictional lives of others (e.g., Richardson's Clarissa). In *Éloge de Richardson*, Diderot reports: «J'ai entendu disputer sur la conduite de ses [*Richardson's*] personages, *comme sur* des événements reels; louer, blamer Paméla, Clarisse, Grandisson, *comme des* personages vivants quo'on aurait connus, et auxquels on aurait pris le plus grand intérêt».[3] Richardson's characters are here described as "virtual" (bereft of the word, of course) in all the relevant senses that resonate with *our* understanding of the term today with regard to the experience of VR. Closer to our century, the relation between the imagination in VR and the imagination in literature, especially the genre of fantasy and science fiction, has often been remarked upon. The influence of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* on the culture and content of VR and gaming culture (RPGs) is especially apparent. The difference between playing *Dungeon and Dragons* and *Dungeons and Dragons: Baldur's Gate*, however, cannot be reduced to a difference between a less imaginative rendering and a more imaginative rendering of fictions on the basis of a difference in "representational media," as proposed, for example, by Travinor.[4] Is not the graphic description of violence and emotion in Homer's *The Iliad* arguably no less visceral than a combat sequence in *Baldur's Gate* or in the narrative of rhetorically gifted DM guiding a party through *The Keep on the Border Lands*? A treatment of the imagination in virtual fictions *of any kind* should ideally be situated within a broader consideration of the imagination that is able to fashion a mosaic of comparisons, through which *other* manifestations of the imaginary, including various literary forms, are brought into the scope of reflection.

Historically, the concept of imagination has always remained inter- or cross-

3 Diderot 1994, p. 37 (my emphasis).

4 Travinor 2009, p. 59.

disciplinary, not limited to any single domain of human experience. A brief glance to the history of the concept of the imagination since Plato and Aristotle reveals two basic challenges for any conception of the imagination. The first consists in the question of whether a *description* of the imagination, as either a faculty of the soul, power of reason, or act of consciousness, is bound to a hybridization of elements: perception, cognitive, image. The imagination has alternatively been understood as a power of image-formation, quasi-perceptual intuition, quasi-cognitive apprehension, etc. A second – and related challenge – turns on the question of whether a *unified* concept of the imagination is at all attainable or whether the "concept" of the imagination must be seen as a set of family resemblances. Both challenges loom large over any discussion of the imagination and must remain questions that cannot be decided here. This difficulty of circumscribing the concept (and hence domain) of the imagination reflects its protean character. The history of the imagination is the history of diverse ways of imagining, and to make this complexity freighted with added difficulty, the history of different ways of imagining is furthermore entangled with different technologies of image-making *and* inscription-making (alphabet, signs, etc.). The phenomenon of VR exemplifies this protean character to an unparalleled degree, comparable, for many, to the invention of the printing press, alphabetic writing systems, or pictorial representation – even though it remains for the moment an *open* question whether VR represents actually a comparable revolution with those events indicated above.

This comparison nonetheless draws its force by calling attention to the inseparability of ways of imagining from the technological platforms for the imagination: writing, painting, etc. Beginning with Paleolithic cave paintings, revolutions of the imagination have also been revolutions of aesthetic technology or, in other words, technologies of the perceptual senses. Unquestionably, the platform of the *image* can be seen as one of the most significant technologies for the imagination. Computer games, simulated realities, and CAVE environments are each examples of technological platforms for the re-shaping and exercise of the imagination. The image remains the critical technological platform for the modern imagination. The ocular drive, or the drive to *visualize* (to see as well as to be seen), dominates the post-modern imagination. Not surprisingly, the hybridization of the technological and the natural (or: "the virtual" and "the real") that is often seen as defining our technological age (e.g., Bruno Latour) is already discernable in the constitution of the image as such, which, as Husserl insightfully characterized, has the constitution of a "perceptual fiction," or, in other words, a hybridization of the perceptual and the imaginary. It would also be too narrow to draw an overly

simplistic contrast between the so-called "dynamic" images of VR and the so-called "static" images of paintings. Late 19th-century and early 20th-century art historians such as Alois Reigl and Aby Warburg had already pioneered the notion of an "animate" or "dynamic" image. Images are not inert objects.[5]

The protean character of the imagination, as exemplified in the visual image, is furthermore associated with other concepts that are as diffuse in meaning as the imagination itself. The volatility of contemporary nomenclature gives evidence of the degree to which VR remains an "open-phenomenon" – a phenomenon still in the making and still open as to its cultural, psychological, and anthropological significance. Nowhere is this volatility more apparent than with distinction between "the virtual" and "the real" – a philosophical distinction that can only be *hazarded* – as well as with the string of (mainly) synonymous terms such as "synthetic world," "digital world," "artificial world," "virtual world," "possible world," etc. The distinction between "real" and "virtual" is a case in point. One common way to draw such a distinction depends on a mirror distinction between "perception" and "imagination." How we understand the relationship between perception and imagination underpins how we think about the distinction between "real" and "virtual." The imagination is not a solitary conceptual creature or phenomenon; it is embedded in a nest of other concepts and associated fields of meaning. It is therefore not surprising that the paucity of reflection on the imagination in VR is allied with other conceptual impoverishments. Undoubtedly, the most important of these is the concept of "world," showcased in Linden Lab's motto: *Your World, Your Imagination*. Yet, as Boellstorff remarks, «the term "world" appears with great frequency» in a host of pairings (*virtual* world, *cyber* world, etc.), yet it «remains far less theorized than the words with which it is paired».[6] The ambivalent reticence of tackling head-on what constitutes a fictional world is apparent in Kendall Walton's caution to «rely as little as possible on any notion of fictional worlds» while at the same time admitting that «we cannot ignore fictional worlds entirely.»[7]

2.

There are exceptions. Yet, ever here, as with a recent philosophical discussion of videogames that shall provide a first orientation for my own considerations

5 See for example Papapetros 2012.

6 Boellstorff 2008, p. 17.

7 Walton 1990, pp. 57-8.

in this paper, much still remains to be developed. In *The Art of Videogames*, Grant Travinor develops an adaption of Kendall Walton's theory of "make-believe" to understand the "virtual fictions" of videogames. Travinor understands fictions as «representational artifacts that depict situations with an imagined existence only».[8] Walton's theory of "fictionalism," which can be situated in the lineage of Vaihinger's theory of fictions, shifts the problem of fictional objects away from the question of linguistic reference to the domain of "pragmatics" and "make-believe," in other words, of how representational artifacts, or "props," are *used* for the imaginary purpose for which they are intended.[9] Whether playing charades, reading a novel, playing *Dungeons and Dragons* or *World of Warcraft*, fictional characters are based on some kind of representational artifact: an ordinary item, words on a page, miniature figurines, or a computer icon on a screen. "Make-believe" is not the suspension of belief but the adoption or enactment of modified forms of belief on the basis of designated "props" that allow for and support psychological, emotional, and intellectual engagement in a world of fiction. We can thus speak of an imaginative attitude or disposition; my attitude is changed and appropriate to the fictional world in which I am engaged. This notion of what Peter Lamarque calls "fictional stance" is clearly anticipated in Husserl's notion of *Stellungnahme*. Yet, for Husserl, every form of intentionality towards the world is defined by a corresponding form of *Stellungnahme*, such that a "fictional stance" represents the stance specific to the imaginary as a distinctive form of intentionality. Husserl proposes a much stronger thesis: toggling from one stance to another is not akin, as Susan Feigin suggests, to a "shift" or "slide" in seeing-as, but a more robust change in the kind of intentionality: to imagine a unicorn as opposed to perceiving a horse is not captured in term of a putative difference in "seeing-as" (as with the paradigmatic duck-rabbit example).

Important as this analysis of fictions is, Travinor nevertheless forgoes any discussion of the "cognitive basis" of make-believe. As he writes: «What exactly the cognitive basis of make-believe or pretense is, especially in its basis in the brain, is not something that I can say a great deal about in this book, and so my reference to it will remain in mostly functional terms. Whether it involves *mental simulation* and *mirror neurons*, and how closely it resembles our everyday representation of the world, there is some functional aspect of the mind that allows us to imagine that things are not the case».[10] Travinor in this respect replicates a theoretical limitation in Walton's own work. As Travinor

8 Travinor 2009, p. 38.

9 See Bouriau 2013, p. 182 ff.

10 Travinor 2009, p. 40.

himself notes: «It might be noted, though, that Walton is somewhat coy about getting into the psychological details of what exactly make-believes are».[11] Such coyness appears infectious. It might be understandable that Travinor does not aim to develop an account of the complex cognitive nature of fictions in a study whose aim is rather to explore various philosophical issues raised by videogames as interactive fictions. Fair enough. On the other hand, even with this reasonable constraint, Travinor's *characterization* of what an analysis of the cognitive basis of the imagination *would* require reveals an uncritical assumption regarding the imagination as a form of consciousness (as well as the proper method for its descriptive analysis), namely, an account of consciousness framed by notions such as "mental simulation" and "mirror neurons." And yet, as Travinor himself implicitly recognizes: «videogames just are representational artifacts that depict situations with an imagined existence only, and that they rely on our cognitive abilities to imagine such things».[12] As already signaled, Travinor omits any consideration of the second part of this general definition, namely, the cognitive abilities on which virtual fictions rely. Yet, the two aspects of his definition of videogames as virtual fictions *imply* a certain conception of the cognitive basis of the imagination: representational artifact and imagined existence only. Both aspects re-inforce the other: the emphasis on the *representational* character of the artifacts, or "props," underlying or supporting virtual fictions goes hand in hand with the insistence that such fictions only possess an imagined existence, viz, as represented by the cognitive abilities of a consciousness.

Whereas Travinor's interest lies in understanding the fictive nature of videogames, in my subsequent reflections, I propose to sketch the outlines of a phenomenological account of the imagination in its salient features for contemporary discussions concerning the phenomenon of virtual reality and compute game experience. Any theory of virtual fiction must imply a theory of the imagination; it is this latter concern that frames my interest in this paper, not the former, although, claims about the constitution of the imagination as a form of consciousness often entail claims about the nature of fictions. I propose to recuperate central insights in Travinor's notion of virtual fiction from within a phenomenological analysis of the "cognitive basis" of the imagination or, in other words, a phenomenological analysis of the imagination as a form of intentionality. As I shall argue, Husserl's conception of the imagination as a distinctive kind of intentionality offers an alternative account that does away with any "representational" relation between the artifact and the imagined

11 Travinor 2009, p. 41.

12 Travinor 2009, p. 44.

object. Moreover, the question of "existence" – of whether imagined objects exist or not, or possess a special form of existence – is to be bracketed or neutralized, thus allowing for a genuinely phenomenological account of the constitution of imaginary objects in their distinctive form of transcendence as unities of meaning and their corresponding form of givenness, or manifestation, in experience. Moreover, I shall outline from a Husserlian vantage-point a more complex notion of a virtual fictional object. Based on Husserl's analysis of an image, fictional objects, whether "perceptual fictions" such as images or pure fictions of the imagination, are phenomenologically to be understood as complex or conglomerate objects, that is, objects constituted in terms of different stratifications of objecthood: perceptual thing, imaginary object, symbol. Lastly, I shall sketch another cardinal insight from Husserl's phenomenology of the imagination: the splitting of consciousness within the imaginary. In this manner, the imagination, as a lived experience, transforms in "fictionalizing" or "virtualizing" consciousness itself (and not just its object).

Can a phenomenological approach offer an analysis of the cognitive basis of make-believe that would both *avoid* a reductionist account of consciousness to "mirror neurons" and *provide* an analysis of those features of the imagination that Travinor deems "particularly useful for explaining the fictive nature of videogames," and as taken from Walton's theory of "make-believe," without, however, any of its phenomenological coyness?

My reflections do not aim at a comprehensive treatment of either a phenomenological conception of the imagination or the relationship between computer games / VR and the imaginary. The narrative dimension of computer games and VR, for example, I have excluded entirely from consideration. I have also excluded a discussion of the ludic constitution of play-experience as well as any discussion of what constitutes a game. My aim is both more narrow and preliminary: it is to explore from a (Husserlian) phenomenological point of view the modes of cognition – imagination and image-consciousness – required for the constitution of imaginary worlds and simulated realities in which the consciousness of the player or avatar projects and discovers herself as another consciousness or life (as a character, fictional person, etc.). Aside from the conceptual resources that phenomenology brings to bear on the imagination, a phenomenological framework is ideally suited for thinking about VR. Phenomenology attempts to map the conceptual geography of consciousness in light of possible objects of experience. On the strength of its suspension of any universal assumption regarding the meaning of reality, a phenomenological study of cognition examines the relation between consciousness and different regions of objects without subsuming those objects

to an ontological significance that would not be disclosed in the specific manner of their own givenness.

3.

Espen Aarseth has usefully proposed the idea of a "conglomerate object" in order to describe the ontological structure of computer games and simulated realties.[13] A sword in *World of Warcraft*, for example, is a conglomerate object. Its constitution as an object is a composition of different "elements" or "layers" of meaning: the metal of the sword is fictional to the degree that it lacks the materiality of a real metal sword; the sharpness of the sword is simulated to the degree that it behaves in prescribed ways within the game logic of *World of Warcraft* that simulates the behavior and properties of sharpness that would belong to a real sword; and the value of the sword is real to the degree that it possess real economic value (the sword can be auctioned on eBay) as well as real emotional value as a function of a player's emotional investment in the having of such and such a sword, of the circumstances in which the player gained the sword within the game-world, etc. Both of these values – economic and emotional – reflect the real *social* value of the sword-object, both "on-line" within *World of Warcraft* and "off-line" within eBay, blogs, and other spill-over contexts. When viewed in terms of a game-object's social value, there is no strict line demarcation between "real" and "virtual." Instead, one should speak of a membrane with variable degrees of elasticity. When viewed ontologically, the sword in *World of Warcraft* lacks the critical element of materiality that would inscribe it within the spatio-temporal world of causal interactions. Instead, its materiality is simulated to the degree that it is embedded within motivational nexus of a player's responses, expectations, and disappointments.

Aarseth's notion of virtual objects as "conglomerate objects" provides a useful point of departure for a phenomenological analysis. In Aarseth's thinking, the constitution of virtual objects as "conglomerate objects" is taken to be an argument that videogames should *not* be considered along the same lines as traditional fictions but should instead be recognized as having a special "ontological" status as virtual objects. As Aarseth argues: «Game worlds and their objects are ontologically different from fictional worlds».[14] By fictional worlds, Aarseth has in mind the world of Madame Bovary, for example. The difference between virtual worlds and fictional worlds, on this account,

13 AARSETH 2007.

14 Quoted in TRAVINOR 2009, p. 44.

consists in the former's dynamic properties (an object in the world of *EverQuest*) in contrast to the latter's inertness (an object in the world of Madame Bovary, etc). This argument has been challenged by Travinor along different lines than what interests me here; for my purpose, what Aarseth assumes is an ontological difference between virtual objects in relation to other kinds of objects due to their "conglomerate" and "dynamic" constitution. What interests me is to show that *all* imaginary objects are in fact "conglomerate" objects of some kind. As Husserl argues in his analysis of image-consciousness, the visual image, which marks the threshold and tension between the perceptual and the imaginary, is itself a conglomerate object. Indeed, Aarseth overlooks that the virtual sword-object as depicted on the screen is not only a conglomerate object in the three senses noted above; it is also a *visual* object – an image on the screen.[15] It is, so to speak, the first conglomerate object, and it is because of its "conglomerate" nature that, as Husserl argues, the consciousness of an image cannot be understood in representational terms. Both insights organize Husserl's phenomenological analysis of what he calls "image-consciousness."

An image is inseparable from the consciousness of an image, that is, from a consciousness for which the image is given as an image; one must perceive the image *as an image*. Since every form of (objectifying) consciousness is the consciousness of an object, Husserl's phenomenological analysis of image-consciousness centers on the question: what kind of intentionality is responsible for the constitution of images as objects of consciousness? On Husserl's account, an image is an intentional object that transcends consciousness, yet its transcendent character is not to be conflated with the transcendence of perceptual objects. The image on my computer screen, a painting of Napoleon, and a photograph of my friend are not mental representations nor are these intentional objects mediated by any internal mental representation. On the contrary, it is the image itself as *depicting* something that I perceive; what I apprehend is what is depicted in the image. The intentional object (Napoleon, my friend) is perceived intuitively as transcending consciousness, i.e., as irreducible to the specific mental contents of consciousness. As a type of intentionality, image-consciousness intends its object (the image) in a manner comparable to perceptual experience: it is the tree itself that I perceive. However, whereas perceptual consciousness intends an object (the tree) with a single dimension, or meaning, of objectivity (within the context of changing horizons of sides, seen and unseen), image-consciousness intends a stratification of intentional objects or, in other words, a

15 Moreover: the sword-object is also a code-object; it is a specific string of code.

conglomerate object. Moreover, a perceptual object possesses a materiality that individuates in space and time as well as inscribed it within a causal web of interactions: the tree exists in physical interaction with other material objects in a way in which the The White Tree of Gondor does not (or a tree in Second Life).

I take it be to one of Husserl's central insights that an image is constituted as a conglomerate object. On Husserl's analysis, an image is composed of three objects that are given to consciousness in terms of a nested relation of foundation and founded. Husserl distinguishes between the "image-thing" (*Bildding*), the "image-object" (*Bildobjekt*), and the "image-subject" (*Bildsujet*). At the perceptual level, an image is a material object or "thing." It is a thing made of wood; it is canvas, it is a pattern of pixels on a screen; it occupies a spatial location; it exists within a nexus of possible causal interaction with other material objects. This material thing, however, must be perceived as an image or "image-object." The colors and lines must be seen as an image (as opposed to just being splotches of colors and a tangle of lines). Much as an image can be a thing made of different types materiality (wood, stone, pixels), an image-object can be fashioned differently, that is, created or constructed according to different styles. Yet, an image-object (to perceive something as an image) is in turn an image seen as depicting something, or what Husserl calls an "image-subject," the subject of the image (what it is about in depicting it). To perceive an image as depicting an "image-subject" – to see the image as the image of something – entails that I perceive a perceptual object (an "image-thing") as being an image (as an "image-object"), that I see *something* as an image in which something else – Napoleon, my friend, etc. – is depicted.

In order to capture conceptually the phenomenon of seeing something in an image, Husserl defines the image as "seeing-in." When I look at an image, I see the depicted image-subject *in* the image, even if the sense of "in" must here be strictly understood in terms of transcendence. Napoleon is not literally "in" the image; yet what I see is Napoleon as an appearance: he appears "in" or as his image (even if when compared to the real perceptual experience of Napoleon I might have noticed that he was not as tall, etc.). The image is the opening of a perceptual appearance to something other than this kind of appearance, an original "there-in" (*Worin*) or "opening of itself" (*Sichöffnens*) in which a non-appearance, something imaginary or not-present, appears.[16] As Husserl notes, «presentations of an image are strange presentations in which a perceptual object is capable and determined to present another object by means of resemblance, in the familiar manner that a physical image presents an

16 Fink 1966, p. 75.

original».[17] The perceptual object as an image possesses a "reality-value" (*Realitätswert*) that splits into two frameworks or contexts (*Zusammenhänge*). An image is a manipulated aspect of perceptual experience, of the real, in which something other than the real appears. This manner of construing the image as a "seeing-in" is associated with the characterization of the image as a window. In this respect, Husserl's window-metaphor recalls a traditional conception of the painting as awindow, through which we look (e.g. Alberti). This metaphor of the image as a window is furthermore connected to the variable significance of surfaces in the history of aesthetics. An image can be thus defined as technological platform; the technology is here the transformation of surface into depth, or an opening of sensibility. This is the sense in which an image opens a distance within sensible appearance, as, for example, Paleolithic cave paintings, for which, according to some interpreters, these paintings functioned like a membrane between reality and visionary experience of altered perceptions.[18] This metaphor of the window is, of course, powerfully re-configured with VR and computer interfaces.

The conglomerate constitution of the image is keyed to what Husserl further identifies as its mode of "dual-apprehension." The object of apprehension is the same, but not seen in the same manner. Image-consciousness is based on the over-lapping apprehension of the physical object (image as thing; i.e., the pixels on the screen as pixels) and the apprehension of the image-object (the pixels on the screen are the image qua image that I perceive); these two apprehensions are in conflict (*Widerstreit*) with each other. When I perceive a physical object as an image (in contrast to perceiving merely a physical object), the apprehension of an image object "wins out" over the underlying perception of the physical object. This idea of double-apprehension plays a central role in the constitution of image-consciousness and its transformative opening of perceptual appearances. Whereas the perceptual givenness of the image as physical object is akin to the givenness of other perceptual objects, Husserl describes the image-object (to see something as an image) as a "perceptual fiction" sustained and constituted through "perceptual imagination." It is important to stress that the fictional character of the image is not to be conflated with illusions and hallucinations, in which case perceptual deception of some kind is involved. To see something as an image is not to be under the

17 Husserl 1980, Hua XXIII, p. 19. «[…] also jene [*Bildvorstellungen*] merkwürdigen Vorstellungen, bei denen ein wahrgenommener Gegenstand einen anderen durch Ähnlichkeit vorstellig zu machen bestimmt und befähig ist, und zwar in der bekannten Weise, in der das physische Bilde das Original vorstellig macht». Cp. Fink 1966, p. 74: «Wir sehen in einer Bildwelt hinein». Husserl speaks of "*hineinschauen*" and "*hineinblicken*" ("looking into"), Husserl 1980, Hua XXIII, p. 34, p. 31.

18 See Williams 2004.

spell of an illusion; the issue here is not whether I take the image to be real, but of whether I see at all something as an image, that I truly see an image, as opposed to merely a physical object as such. The imagination transforms a perceptual given in the specific sense of over-laying an interpretative apprehension, a new manner of "seeing-as." In this manner, perceptual appearances are opened to another form of fictional appearance. A distance *within* appearance emerges; the appearance of the image-object is set against, or in profile, with perceptual appearance. As Husserl writes: «The image-object is given in a perceptual apprehension that is modified through the character of the imagination and which, thus, carries the character of unreality and of conflict with the actual present».[19] The "unreality" of the image can be interpreted in a more contemporary register in terms of "virtuality." The image as image possesses a virtual manner of givenness.

The underlying perceptual apprehension is modified in its manner of presentation by the imagination, transformed from a perceptual presentation (*Gegenwärtigung*) into a "re-presentification" (*Vergegenwärtigung*) of something other-than-visible – the depicted and "spiritual" (*geistig*) image-subject seen in the image. This opening of perceptual experience is in conflict with itself, stamped by the interjected character of the virtual. An image-object is a visual fiction; it does not appear without a consciousness that implicitly posits the image as *not* appearing in the same manner in which perceptual objects appear. For these reasons, the image-object cannot be described as an object that exists as real. On the contrary, as Husserl writes: «In truth, the image-object does not exist; this does not just mean that the image-object does not exist outside my consciousness. The image-object does not exist inside my consciousness; indeed, the image-object does not have any existence».[20] The image-object is "a nothing" (*ein Nichts*). Although Husserl does not reach the Sartrean claim that the transcendence of the image is the penetration of "nothingness" into the plenitude of perceptual appearance, this insistence on the phenomenological nothing of the image-object introduces a note of caution for any uncritical invocation of "ontology" for fictional objects.

The phenomenon of "seeing-in" identified by Husserl as constitutive of how an image-subject is contrasted to the phenomenon of seeing through an image with symbolic images. An image need not only or always depict; an image may

19 HUSSERL 1980, Hua XXIII, p. 47. «[…] das Bildobjekt aber ist gegeben in einer Wahrnehmungsauffassung, die modifiziert ist durch der Charakter der Imagination; sie trägt den Charakter der Unwirklichkeit, des Widerstreits mit der aktuellen Gegenwart».

20 HUSSERL 1980, Hua XXIII, p. 24. «Wahrhaft existiert das Bildobjekt nicht, das heißt nicht nur, es hat keine Existenz außerhalb meines Bewusstseins, sondern auch, es hat keine solche innerhalb meines Bewusstsein, es hat überhaupt keine Existenz».

also symbolize. In the case of an image in which an image-subject comes to appearance, we might speak of an immanent space of manifestation *within* the image. Husserl in this regard speaks of the mode of "referring-into itself" (*Hineinweisen*). The image-subject over-laps (*deckt sich*) with the image-object; the depicted subject is apprehended *in* the image-object and thus represented as "non-appearing" in its being-pictured (*nichterscheinende bildmäßig repräsentierte*).[21] The image-object depicts something other than itself – but the object depicted in an image may either itself be an object that is real (e.g. my brother) or an object that enjoys a purely imaginary givenness (e.g. Fafnir). In both instances, the depicted image-subject is given to me in the image in the form of "not-appearing," as an absence, in the sense of «an appearance of a not-now in a now» or, in other words, «something not-appearing in something appearing».[22] The image-subject "saturates" or "penetrates" (*durchdringen*) the apprehension of the image object, and this applies to both types of image-subjects, objects that have real, independent existence (my brother) as well as purely imaginary objects (a unicorn). By contrast, a symbolic image is an image in the mode of "referring-beyond" (*Hinwegweisen*), and the manners of symbolic reference are here as wide as the symbolic system in which any particular symbol is *legible*. A symbolic image does not render its object present (*vorstellig*) in the manner of an immanent image; we do not have a depiction or "seeing in" (*hineinschauen*). This distinction between "immanent" and "symbolic" images is not exclusive; many game objects or avatars, which are given in visual form on a computer screen, function as both an immanent and a symbolic image. The visual appearance of my avatar presents an imaginary look that I fashion for myself, for which I can provide better or worst images; but my image of my avatar may function as a symbolic image, referring to membership in a clan of Furries or a Gorean community. Indeed, images on a screen in video games and VR often function dually as both picturing images and symbolizing images, where the latter kind also might also carry further social and economic meaning (within its fictional world).

The essence of an image is "re-presentification" or rendering present (*vorstellig machen*) in the form of depiction ("*vergegenwärtigt*, *verbildlicht*, *veranschaulicht*"). The image-subject saturates the image in such a manner that it is not only that we see something *in* an image, but that, we also, in this manner, become *immersed* in an image, or into an image-world or image-space. As Husserl remarks: «We see the intended object in the image *or* the intended

21 Husserl 1980, Hua XXIII, p. 31.

22 Husserl 1980, Hua XXIII, p. 29. «[…] eine Erscheinung eines Nicht-Jetzt im Jetzt» or «eines Nicht-erscheinenden im Erscheinenden».

object looks at us from the image».[23] The ambivalence of "or" in this statement expresses the ambivalence of *directionality*. Husserl speaks of the intended object *looking at me from the image*; this description is indicative of the sense in which we become immersed in, or drawn into, an image – the "spell" of the image, to which we are captive and captivated.

4.

This immersion (or: absorption) into an image is also connected to my embodiment. Contrary to a purely "intellectualist" or "disembodied" perspective on image-consciousness, Husserl explores the different ways in which my embodiment contributes to, and becomes itself transformed and projected into, an image. Given that image-consciousness is based on perceptual experience, the perception of the image-thing involves, according to Husserl phenomenological theory of perception, visual *and* kinaesthetic sensations. In the painting of a landscape, for example, the imaginary-appearances (the depicted trees, etc.) are given in a certain spatial orientation, relative to the position of my own body. Moreover, my eyes must move across the surface the painting in scanning the landscape. In addition to the actual movement of my eyes (but also, of my body as I shift my bodily position, moving closer to the painting, etc.), Husserl insists on the figurative dimension of saccadic eye movement. As Husserl remarks, «eine Erscheinung als Bild erleben, das fordert, all das modifiziert haben, also auch die kinästhetischen Empfindungen».[24] I am drawn into the image along the lines of the constituting double-apprehension of image-consciousness. As Husserl notes, «das Ich und der Ich-Leibe [ist auch] in die Verbildlichung mit hineingezogen».[25] On this view, the appearance of the image-object, in its hybrid condition in-between perception (image-thing) and imagination (image-subject), is inseparable from experienced "quasi-sensations" and "quasi-kinaesthetic sensations." The spatiality of my body becomes projected into the image and this accounts for the different ways in which, in first-person shooter computer games, for example, the spatiality of the computer game space happens through "quasi-kinaesthetic" sensations. Not only does my own body move to the left or to the right (as when I respond by jerking to the left or the right when handling the

23 HUSSERL 1980, Hua XXIII, p. 32. «In das Bild schauen wir den gemeinten Gegenstand hinein, *oder* aus ihm schaut er <zu> uns her» (my emphasis).

24 HUSSERL 1973, Hua XIII, p. 293.

25 HUSSERL 1973, Hua XIII, p. 302.

controls), but the schema of my body becomes lived-through "at a distance," and "in the picture or image." There is a "virtualization" of embodiment that is both experienced through the image but also constitutive of the spatiality of the image or image-space.

Yet, to what extent can we speak phenomenologically of an embodied experience within a virtual world? Even though Husserl speaks of "quasi-kinaesthetic" sensations of the imaginary, it remains a complex question whether the lived-body (*Leib*) can in truth *appear* and be experienced within the imaginary. In *Ideen II*, we find an extremely suggestive passage that speaks directly to this issue (albeit, it goes without saying, not in the present context of a concern with virtual reality). As Husserl famously argues, the lived-body (*Leib*) is originally constituted through the sense of touch. "Tactuality" (*Taktualität*) is accorded a special constitutive function, which Husserl signals by creating a special term – *Empfindnis*. Whereas the term *Empfindung*, a classical term for sensations, is reserved for Husserl to speak of visual, auditory, and olfactory sensations, the sense of touch is given its own term in order to identify what is peculiar about tactile sensations from other sense modalities. In order to further describe the peculiarity of touch and its special constitutive function, Husserl images a purely ocular subject. In such an instance, as he writes: «*A subject whose only sense was the sense of vision could not at all have an appearing body* [*Leib*]; this subject would have appearances of things in the play of kinaesthetic motivations (which could not be apprehended in a bodily manner), this subject would see real things. One could not say, however, that a subject whose only sense was the sense of vision could see his own body [*Leib*], since he would be missing the specific character of his body, and even the freedom of kinaesthetic developments that go hand in hand with the free movement of this "body" would not make it into his body».[26]

In the development of Husserl's analysis in *Ideen II*, this example serves the critical function of illustrating the constitutive difference between vision and touch as well as the general insight that it is this *difference* that constitutes the body into a lived-body. Whereas vision is a purely objectifying consciousness or experience, since the objects of my vision are given to me as not-me, as standing there before me, and thus always at a distance, tactile experiences are constituted around a distinctive form of "double-apprehension" (*Doppelauffassung*). Hence the rational for the introduction of the specific term of *Empfindnis* for tactile sensations. What is distinction with tactile sensations is that, as Husserl's celebrated example of the hands touching each other illustrates, as the left hand touches the right hand, we experience both the

26 HUSSERL 1952, Hua IV, p. 150 (my translation).

sensation of the right hand being touched by the left while also the left hand feeling itself as touching; but whereas in the first instance, the left hand makes known to me ("objectifies") the physical properties of my right hand (roughness, extension, etc.), the sensation of sensing within the left hand does not make known to me real, objective physical properties of its own hand even as it does feel or make known objective feature of the right. Husserl emphasizes this peculiarity of touching's double-sensation in terms of localization: the sensing of my hand is localized in the hand itself in a manner in which the sensing of vision is not. There is no visual impression of vision itself. Vision does not "localize" itself in the eyes. I do not sense my eyes seeing in the manner in which I sense my hand touching. What is peculiar, in other words, is the localization of sensation in touch: I sense the place from which I touch. This experience of the body as both sensed and sensing accounts for the double-constitution of body through touch – even though Husserl does not claim that what turns my body into my lived body is that my hands touch it, but that something touches it.

If we return to Husserl's example, we can imagine that a purely ocular subject – a subject whose only sense is the sense of vision – as a disembodied subject within a virtual world. First person shooter games (for example, the classic *Doom*) or the point of view of avatar in Second Life situate the player/driver from a point of view in which the body cannot be fully represented on the screen. We can take this as emblematic of Husserl's claim that the appearance of the body, by which he means, to experience one's own body from within, as a lived-body, requires tactility and in the specific sense of the localization of tactile sensations. The body can be *seen* as a thing like any other material and extended spatial object, yet it is only through what Husserl calls «das Einlegen der Empfindungen im Abtasten, durch das Einlegen der Schmerzempfindungen usw., kurzum durch die Lokalisation der Empfindungen» that the body becomes lived.[27]

The "dual-apprehension" of tactility (the touched physical properties and the sensing of touch itself) is not the only peculiarity of the lived-body. The lived-body is also the intersection of *two* systems of "conditionality": physical causality and psycho-physical motivation. The lived-body (*Leib*), as both a material body and a self-animating body, marks the place (*die Stelle*) where both of these systems are interwoven.[28] On the one hand, the causal nexus of the world is constituted for me through my perceptual experiences of my body: not only can I perceive physical properties of objects (elasticity, etc.) and their

27 HUSSERL 1952, Hua IV, p. 151.

28 HUSSERL 1952, Hua IV, § 18.

causal interaction, but my own body is subject to the same forces and laws of causality as any other material body. On the other hand, how objects *appear* to me can also change, yet not merely as a function of causal change in the world. Fictional objects, due to their intrinsic lack of materiality and hence possible real causal interactions with other material bodies, are "interactive" only in correlation to the kinaesthetic system of motivations that governs the changing landscape of appearances for a subject. The so-called "real" interactions of virtual objects *on the screen* (the explosion of an object caused by a missile, jumping over an obstacle, opening a door) are constituted through the motivational nexus of perception and their corresponding movements in my hand (as it controls the joystick, etc). My lived-body constitutes the spatiality of a fictional environment on the screen "at a distance" from my own embeddness in the causal nexus of the world. The entanglement of two systems of conditionality is temporally suspended, thus allowing the system of motivational conditionality to constitute *apart* a quasi-spatial and quasi-material world on screen.

5.

Husserl argues that the imagination is a distinct form of consciousness, not to be conflated with a form of image-consciousness. Image consciousness is a consciousness of "otherness" (*Bewußtseins des 'Andersseins'*) based on a conflict (*Widerstreitsbewußtseins*) and "doubling of consciousness" (*Verdoppelung des Bewußtseins*) or "division of consciousness" (*eine Zwiespältigkeit des Bewusstseins*).[29] It is this division within consciousness that becomes further radicalized, and enriching for the life of consciousness, with the pure imagination, such that, as we shall next discuss, consciousness *itself* becomes "virtual" or "irreal." Acts of what Husserl calls the pure imagination take the form of the "consciousness of the not-present" (*Nichtgegenwärtigkeits-Bewußtseins*).[30] Both are forms of "re-presentification" (*Vergegenwärtigung*) in which an object – the depicted image-subject in image-consciousness and the imaginary object in imagination – is given as absent or "not-present." In the case of the pure imagination, an act of consciousness (the act of imagining so and so) intends its imaginary object, yet this act of consciousness is not founded on an underlying perceptual apprehension of an image-thing (the image as a physical object) or an image-object. To see an image of a unicorn is

29 Husserl 1980, Hua XXIII, p. 32; pp. 46-47.

30 Husserl 1980, Hua XXIII, p. 59.

not the same as to imagine a unicorn. In the case of the imagination, the imagined unicorn is discontinuous with perceptual experience, as it possesses a "neutralized" form of givenness. The imaginary unicorn is neither real nor unreal, but "irreal" or "virtual." As with image-consciousness, the imagination is also, but differently, a form of double-consciousness. When I imagine seeing a unicorn, consciousness, on Husserl's account, reproduces its own activity of perception in a modified form. Consciousness creates a semblance of its own activity of perception. When I imagine a unicorn, I am not looking at an actual image of a unicorn in my mind; instead, I seem to see a unicorn, when in actual fact I am not seeing anything at all. My consciousness takes on the modified form of *resembling* what it is to perceive a unicorn. This semblance of consciousness constitutes the "as if" (*als ob*) character of the imaginary: the unicorn appears to me *as if* it actually appeared to me; in imagining that I see a unicorn, it is *as if* I actually perceived a unicorn. This double-consciousness of the imagination is a consciousness in conflict with itself. Consciousness neutralizes itself in imagining an experience that it does not actually experience, but which, nonetheless, it experiences in a modified form, as "irreal," as an experience at a distance.

As discussed, in both instances of image-consciousness and the imagination, consciousness is itself modified; in the particular instance of the imagination, consciousness is "virtualized" or "irrealized" in such a manner that consciousness divides or splits itself (what Husserl calls: *Ich-Spaltung*). The imagined consciousness is "irrealized" in the sense of losing its determinateness, while still retaining its character as a lived experience. As Husserl observes: «Das Ich ist unbestimmt, wie ja auch das Phantasieobjekt sind – so unbestimmt, dass man nach ihrem näheren Wie gar nicht fragen kann. So kann ich auch nicht fragen, was für einen Leib der Bild-Zuschauer hat etc.».[31] In this respect, the self-division of consciousness produces and sustains an "imagination-ego" or "phantom-ego" (*Phantasie-Ego*) along with a "phantom-body," which can be transformed, and with which consciousness becomes other than itself. By the same token, the imagined or phantom-ego becomes open in its indeterminateness: I become other in losing the determinateness that I am. As Husserl argues, the imagination produces «ein pures Phantasie-Ich, mit einer unbestimmten Leiblichkeit, einer unbestimmten Persönlichkeit, bestimmt nur durch die Akte der Betrachtung, der Aufmerksamkeit, das Haben des Aspekte, das Erleben der vom Künstler mittels des Bildes erregten Stimmungen»[32]. It is on account of this openness of

31 HUSSERL 1973, Hua XIII, p. 301.

32 HUSSERL 1973, Hua XIII, p.301.

consciousness in becoming other than itself that consciousness can project itself into lives of others, whether real or imaginary. Moreover, on the strength of the earlier account of the image as a platform for the imagination – as a site of the imagination – consciousness can project its imagined-ego onto the platform of an image: I become the representation or image of my imaginary life. The imagined ego is experienced at a distance "from myself," as a fictionalization or fictional modification of my actual ego.

This modification of the ego and its self-alienation, so to speak, into a "phantom-ego" constitutes the possibility of projecting myself into the imaginary (*Hineinphantasieren*). As Husserl expresses the insight: «I am an actor in an imagined world» («Ich bin Akteur in der phantasierten Welt»).[33] But as Husserl asks: «Ist das Subjekt in der Phantasie *mit seinem Leib* identisch mit dem aktuellen Ich?»[34] Though the imagined-ego is not identical with my actual ego, some over-lap must occur, in the sense that my imagined-ego is the *analogon* of my actual ego. I see myself – my consciousness *and* its incarnation – "from inside."

6.

As I hope my discussion has suggested, this capacity to experience myself at a distance and produce an incompatibility within myself constitutes the basis for the experience of virtual or simulated realities. I can become a spectator to my own consciousness, which has been "detached" from myself. I can project my simulated consciousness elsewhere – a technological platform, an artificial ecology, another human being, or an imaginary world. The ability for role-playing requires a complex constitution whereby I project a semblance of my own consciousness into an "object" of image-consciousness (in the case of visually driven computer games); yet, I do so without necessarily having to *identify* with this imagined life. There is no necessary implication that the virtual consciousness I imagine must be a consciousness in which I identify myself or which expresses a wish fulfillment. Given that the imaginary is based on an incompatibility within consciousness, there is no one single meaning or rule that structures this "self experience at a distance;" hence, the centrality of play in the constitution of simulated worlds. An appropriate description for

33 Husserl 1973, Hua XIII, p. 313. See also Husserl 1973, Hua XIII «Das Ich in der Phantasie ist hier phantasiemässig bewusst dem aktuellen Ich, es ist nicht abbildlich vergegenwärtigt, sondern reproduktiv.», p. 303.

34 Husserl 1973, Hua XIII, p. 303.

this neutralization of consciousness is that consciousness produces itself as a *virtual consciousness in the experience of the imaginary*. Computer games are technological platforms for the "virtualization of consciousness" precisely to the degree that I am capable of experiencing myself at a distance through an image-consciousness into which I project and re-constitute myself as other than actual.

This sketch of a phenomenological approach to virtual fictions centers on Husserl's guiding insight into the "double-consciousness" of the imagination, and the manner in which consciousness becomes other than itself through a self-induced modification or "self-virtualization." If we return to two of the studies evoked in my introductory comments, it is clear the extent to which a phenomenological treatment of the imagination, even in the outline form here presented, can further our understanding of the exercise of the imagination in VR. As Burnett notes: «Games are about gaps, and gaps are about finding a place for the player to affect the experiences he or she has. They are about role playing and imaginary projections of self into interfaces that have enough power to absorb a variety of needs and desires. In other words, they are about using the power of fantasy to allow players to see into their motivations and to hear their desires through the avatars that are generated in the screen environment».[35] This gap is precisely the double-consciousness of the imagination, as explored through Husserl's phenomenological framework. Even more strikingly: Boellstorff reports a Second Life resident exclaiming that «this is how I see myself on the inside», as testimony to her experience of virtual embodiment. In the words of another Second Life resident: «in real life, you get to know someone from the outside in, but in Second Life you get to know them from the inside out».[36] As Husserl remarked in his own investigation of the imagination: «Das hier zur Vorstellung kommende Ich ist ein Spiegelbild meines aktuellen, also selbstwahrgenommenen Ich, also Leiblichkeit und Geistigkeit von 'innen' gesehen, nicht von 'außen' gesehen».[37]

35 BURNETT 2005, p. 190.

36 BOELLSTORFF 2008, p. 134; p. 159.

37 HUSSERL 1973, Hua XIII, p. 306.

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