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Defining Virtual Worlds and Virtual Environments

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This is a brief essay, we call "think-pieces", designed to stimulate a discussion on a particular topic. The topic for this series of essays is "defining virtual worlds".

Keywords: virtual worlds, virtual environments, research.

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Defining Virtual Worlds and Virtual Environments

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Virtual worlds are persistent virtual environments in which people experience others as being there with them - and where they can interact with them. I have argued for more than ten years for a clear definition of *virtual environments* and *virtual reality* technology as “a computer-generated display that allows or compels the user (or users) to have a sense of being present in an environment other than the one they are actually in, and to interact with that environment” (Schroeder 1996: 25); or, in short, ‘being there’. This entails that *multi-user* or *collaborative* or *shared virtual environments* are environments or systems which users experience other participants as being present in the same environment and interacting with them – or ‘being there together’ (Schroeder 2006). Note that the definition focuses on sensory experience. If the sensory element of experiencing a place or space other than the one you are physically in, or of experiencing other people as being there with you, is taken away, then anything goes and definitions become meaningless: why shouldn’t books, text-based Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), dreams or many other phenomena be called virtual environments or virtual worlds?

The difference between virtual reality or *virtual environments* as against *virtual worlds* is that the latter term has been applied to persistent online social spaces; that is, virtual environments that people experience as ongoing over time and that have large populations which they experience together with others as a world for social interaction. Virtual worlds can therefore be distinguished from online gaming and Massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs) in that they are third spaces, online places for socializing (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006). Put the other way around, online games are a subset of virtual worlds; namely, those where the activity revolves around gaming activities. That is not to say that online games are not sociable; many studies have shown that online games are used to a large extent for socializing purposes (Axelsson and Regan, 2006). Nevertheless, games are primarily designed to foster accumulating points or reaching new levels and the like, whereas social spaces have no such focus.

Let’s be clear about why we need definitions: first, to set the social implications of virtual worlds or virtual environments technology apart from other ones, and second, to guide research. In popular discourse, the word ‘virtual’ has come to mean anything online (as in ‘virtual money’), but in that case, the word becomes useless for research since it is too broad (why not in this case say ‘electronic transfer’?). Money *within* virtual worlds, in contrast, pertains to currency related to the objects *within* them. We can advance our understanding of society and research if we use definitions that clearly set phenomena apart from others and that provide an accurate and useful grasp of the world around us, including virtual ones.

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