



Real Virtuality

by Anna Longo

What is the relation between a physical object and its virtual version? Can it be said that they are equivalent since they both contain the information for them to be recognizable and interacted with meaningfully? Or, do we have to consider that a virtual object is less real than a physical one in the same way that a representation, like a picture, cannot perfectly replace its referent? Do virtual objects have the same social value as real ones? To answer these questions, I am going to take into account both sides: the arguments supporting a realist account of VR and those leading to a fictionalist perspective, finally I will propose a further option inspired by Antonin Artaud. Accordingly, we will see how a virtual exhibition of design objects might be considered as the creation of a new design object.

Virtual realism

As David Chalmers explains, to be a virtual realist means to hold that “virtual reality is a sort of genuine reality, virtual objects are real objects, and what goes on in virtual reality is truly real” (Chalmers 2017: 309). Something real is defined as being mind-independent and as having a causal power, i.e. to be able to modify the state of another real thing. According to this definition, a stone is considered real while a dream or Santa Claus are not, so what about virtual reality? VR is a computer-generated environment that is immersive and interactive, hence, for Chalmers, a virtual object has to be considered as a real object because it is grounded on a computational process (mind independence) and it corresponds to a data structure that has the power of causing perceptions (modifications) in the interacting subject (it generates the inputs that are processed by the user’s sensory organs via VR headsets and suits). Moreover, a virtual object can provoke a change in another one – for instance, a virtual bat hits a virtual ball or my avatar eats a virtual sushi – and such interactions entail modifications at the level of the data structures. As a consequence, virtual objects must be considered as real mind-independent objects and events in VR are the genuine effects of a



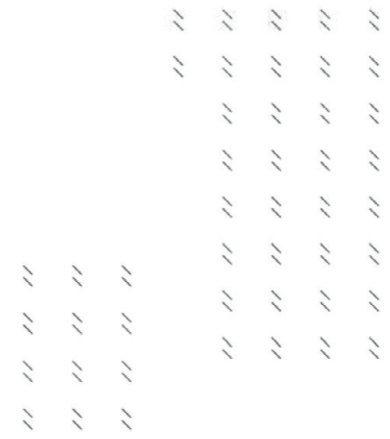


real causal interaction among data structures that are grounded on real computer processes. These data structures are digital objects that Chalmers compares to the atomic organization of phenomenal objects. Hence, a virtual object is the sensible appearance of a digital object, in the same way that a phenomenon is the result of the interaction between an atomic structure and a subject's sense organs. The brain produces the same image when it receives information coming from an atomic organization, and a digital structure means that digital and physical objects are equivalent: they provide the subject with identical data streams. Hence, according to Chalmers, virtual objects are as real as material ones and experiences in VR are as valuable as those in the physical world. Should we conclude that the virtual version of an exhibition is potentially equivalent to the original with regard to the visitor's experience and satisfaction?

Virtual factionalism

Considering Chalmers' arguments, it seems like the virtual simulation of an object might be considered to be equivalent to its physical counterpart only if we are exclusively interested in its informational structure, i.e. in what is pertinent in order to use it. However, it is at least doubtful that an object can be reduced to an information structure since it might have values that do not exactly correspond to functionality. For example, a digital library can be considered equivalent to a material one since we can extract the same useful information, however the identification fails from the perspective of the qualitative appreciation of the infinite number of details that make any single paper sheet different from any other. Hence, it would be more correct to say that the virtual version of an object cannot replace it in the same way, as a representation is not equivalent to its referent. This conclusion is in line with the position held by the so-called "virtual fictionalists", like Neil McDonnell and Nathan Wildman according to whom a digital object is a mere simplification of the corresponding physical object and a virtual object is a representation of a phenomenal one. A digital object, in its data structure, provides the information needed to recognize it (a wooden table, a tree through the window, a soft red carpet) and to interact with it, according to the ends of the simulation, however, it would be misleading to argue, as Chalmers does, that physical objects really *are* such information patterns.





For these reasons, McDonnell and Wildman (2019: 21) propose to consider VR according to Kendall Walton's definition of fiction¹: "a fiction is a representational work that has as one of its functions the role of serving as a prop in a specific game of make-believe" (1990: 51). For Walton, representations – like paintings or sculptures but also dolls and toy cars – are devices to make the spectator believe that she is engaging with the real object (rather than with its representative) when she is accepting to engage with the rules of a game stating to treat a specific element *as if* it was a particular object. Mimetic representations are like children's games where a broomstick is believed to be a horse since it has same features in common with the real animal (for instance, one can run while holding a broomstick between the legs). Representations are then games of make-believe that are both imaginative and structured as there are rules establishing what is correct to imagine and what is not. By including VR under the category of *walt-fictionalism*, McDonnell and Wildman claim that digital objects are like props in a game of make-believe and that virtual objects are fictional equivalents of specific material objects. As props in a game of make-believe, digital objects still have some sort of causal power as they provide the rules for imagining and using virtual objects within a specific fictional situation (like a video game or a simulation like Second life), however they cannot be considered to provide the subject with an experience equal to that of the represented object. As a consequence, digital objects can be said to be real objects in the same sense that a painting or a recording are real things (mind independent) even though they are not what they represent. VR is then defined as a game of make-believe, a fictional space where we engage with representations or props as if we were interacting with the real physical entity: our experience is perfectly real but it is the experience of a fiction.

Following McDowell and Wildman, can we then consider virtual versions of design objects as games to make-believe? Is a virtual exhibition of design objects a mere representation with which we engage as if it was a collection of physical pieces? But isn't this engagement possible only because we conventionally agree, on the meaning that a collection of design objects we

¹ Kendall Walton is a philosopher who introduced the theory of representation, known as the make-believe theory (Walton 1990).





can experience, is an exhibition of virtually designed objects rather than anything else?

Virtual objects as social objects

Social objects have been introduced in the discussion about the ontology of VR by Peter Ludlow to challenge both, realism and fictionalism (Ludlow, 2019). A clarifying example of a social object is money, a piece of paper the function of which cannot be said to be related to or caused by its physical (or digital) structure since it is completely socially constructed: virtual money is real money because we attribute to it a specific function by convention. Hence, virtual money is not properly speaking a fiction or a prop in a make-believe game since we can use it for actually buying virtual objects as well as real ones². According to Ludlow, it is because there are previous conventional agreements that specific objects assume a function that is independent from their physical features, and it is because objects have such a socially constructed function that their digital instantiations are used in some ways rather than others. For example, eating virtual sushi with a friend's avatar in VR is merely pretending what would be experienced by the digital object (a prop in a game of make-believe), and not an experience that is equivalent to the real one. Rather, according to Ludlow, the virtual dinner is the transposition of a meaningful social activity in VR (the same goes for conferences, shows and concerts organized in virtual spaces). Accordingly, a social object is ontologically prior to the corresponding virtual object and that the "causal" power of the digital structure subsists only because it is grounded on social agreement. A data structure or a digital object has a meaning that depends upon its environmental embedding, i.e. upon the social world that lies outside the simulation. Hence, VR is a social object, a specific cultural production, the meaning and function of which is relative to the context of its creation – for instance, Second Life is a social object with a function that can be properly grasped only by referring it to the historical situation in which it is embedded. Following Ludlow's argument, we could say that an exhibition is a social object and its virtual counterpart as well, even though they are not exactly the same social object: they exert a

2. Ludlow explains that in Second life it is possible to use virtual money to buy virtual objects that are delivered to the avatar and, in addition, material objects that are delivered to the physical address of the buyer (2019:4)





function that cannot be properly evaluated without taking into account the human environment in which they are produced.

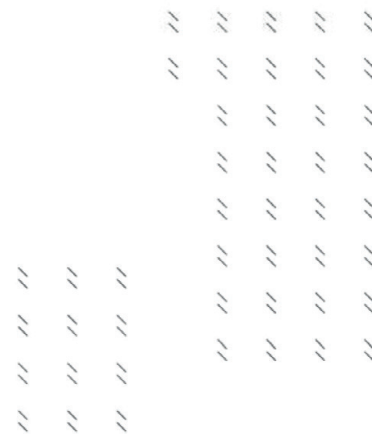
Nevertheless, I am not sure that the value of an exhibition can be reduced to that of any other kind of social object. The concept of social object seems to be, in fact, possibly extended to any sort of object the function of which derives from stipulation and is established conventionally. Moreover, although temporally evolving and locally differentiated, social conventions establish normative rules for judging, they introduce criteria for recognizing the true and the false as well as for distinguishing the correct and incorrect. If artistic exhibitions have some effective value and some real causal power isn't because they challenged conventional ways of conceiving reality and organizing the field of social practices? Can we think of a design collection as an event that actually challenges ordinary cultural determinations and perceptive automatisms? As an event that can be actualized differently in exhibitions, physical and virtual, that appears as totally new and surprising worlds? If this is acceptable, then we should say that a virtual exhibition is neither something equivalent to its material model, nor a fiction (a masquerade), but a singular and original actualization of a virtuality, of a potentiality that is implied by the collection of design objects. Accordingly, an exhibition, physical or virtual, is the realization of one of the possible worlds that are implied by the objects and that express it as irreducible experiences. It seems to me that this outlook of VR is in line with a notion introduced previously by Antonin Artaud.

Real virtuality

Artaud was the first to employ the expression "virtual reality" (Artaud 1958: 35) in the essay "Alchemist Theatre" to stress the analogy between the extra-historical dimension of the objects or signs that are used to construct actual theatrical representations and the archetypal symbols³ that alchemists mix and combine in magic formulas for producing gold. Such symbolical forms are not like Platonic ideas, real beings with respect to which sensible things are mere

3. This comparison is inspired by Carl Jung's research on archetypal forms in alchemy. Virtual reality is then connected to the non-actual reality of unconscious archetypes or symbolic forms that, according to Jung, inform human life.

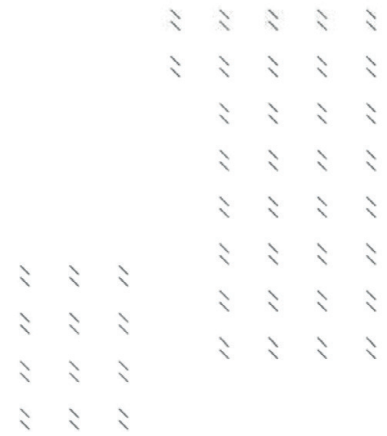




appearances, rather they are some sort of zero degree of being that do not exist outside material mixtures that, at any time, actualize some of them to a certain degree. With this regard Artaud claims that “all true alchemists know alchemical symbols are chimeras just as theatre is a chimera” (ibid.): this is the reason why the ontological dimension of these idealities is virtuality, the domains of the symbolical that is distinguished from both, the real and the imaginary. As Deleuze (an engaged reader of Artaud) explains, the virtual is “real without being actual, ideal without being abstract” (Deleuze 2014: 272) and “the characteristic of virtuality is to exist in such a way that it is actualized by being differentiated and is forced to differentiate itself, to create its lines of differentiation in order to be actualized” (Deleuze 1991: 97). While the imaginary is the result of assembling empirical characteristics that belong to different beings for producing the mental image of non-empirically existing entities (fictions like unicorns, monsters, etc.), the virtual is the domain of the genetic elements that are supposed to produce the empirical compounds that can be experienced in reality. As zero degrees of being, symbolic elements are pure potentialities that are distinguished by which is positional - like in the tables that alchemists used to classify the elements - and they never exist in a pure state but only as reciprocally determined portions (some actual degree) within the infinity of empirical beings that express them.

We can now understand what Artaud meant when he said that theater, like alchemy, is a virtual reality: it is the domain of the extra historical symbolic elements that incarnate in sensible objects by actualizing some of their unexpressed potential, as if material things were the expression of the infinite potentiality of virtual symbols. Since they are different from everyday empirical realizations, theatrical representations are some sort of alternative or virtually possible realities that aggress the subject, since they put him in front of a matter for which he does not have any concept. These real virtualities compel us to think, as they violently stimulate the production of the concepts suitable for a totally new social organization. For Artaud, the positive role of theatres, which has been lost in contemporary culture, is that it is in fact a virtual art, for it does not produce fictions but put thoughts in motion, against the consensual habits in which its creative and disruptive vitality is repressed. By describing the original role of theater, Artaud





explains that

it reforges the links between what does and does not exist, between the virtual nature of the possible and the material nature of existence. It rediscovers the idea of figures and archetypal symbols which act like sudden silences, fermatas, heart stops, adrenaline calls, incendiary images surging into our abruptly awakened minds. It restores all our dormant conflicts and their powers, giving these powers names we acknowledge as signs. Here before us, a bitter clash of symbols takes place, hurled one against the other in an inconceivable riot. For theatre can only happen the moment the inconceivable really begins, where poetry taking place on stage nourishes and super-heats created symbols. (Artaud 1958: 18)

That theater is virtual reality does mean that it is a fictional representation of reality (make-believe), nor that theatre is a technique for producing experiences that are equivalent to those of our empirical interaction with reality (what is true in reality is also true in theatrical representations). In addition, it does not entail that elements in theatrical representations are social objects the function and the sense of which is perfectly clear by considering the spatio-temporal context of the production of specific texts. Rather, theatre is a real virtuality, the result of the difficult art of recombining archetypal, unconscious symbols in order to actualize a representation that challenges the consensual and normalized order, an order that represses rather than resolves the vital conflict through which thought exerts its creative power by continually disrupting its own productions. As a consequence, a virtual design exhibition is the actualization of an autonomous world that is implied by the collection of objects, a sort of brand new object or a world that testifies our ability to always generate new experiences.





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