Existential Immersion and Care in Virtual Worlds

(The draft is still missing a brief introduction, that will also be shaped in response to the feedback we receive, and, with editorial guidance, will also respond to the overarching themes of the book.)

In context of digital games, and virtual environments more generally, 'immersion' is a contested term which has been used to refer, rather indiscriminately, to a range of different experiential phenomena - from the sense of transportation to a perceptual world that is different from that inhabited by one's physical body, to the sense of intense absorption in a task or activity that demands one's full attention (Calleja 2011). There are blurred conceptual boundaries between immersion and related concepts like presence (McMahan 2003) and flow (Michailidis et al 2018). This has resulted in immersion becoming a vague and amorphous concept that, often, is simply used to indicate a high degree of engagement with the virtual world - whatever experiential form this engagement takes.

To render 'immersion' a more definite and usable concept, we choose to follow Gordon Calleja in reserving the term for the feeling of experiential transportation to, and presence in, a domain that is physically removed from one's everyday lived experience. If we delve into how immersion, in this sense, has been understood, we find that, as a general rule, immersion in virtual environments has been connected to the sensory qualities of the experience of being-there. In the context of virtual reality, Frank Biocca and Ben Delaney (1995) typify this tendency in their equation of immersion to "the degree to which a virtual environment submerges the perceptual system of the user" (p. 57). In a very similar way, Janet H. Murray's oft-quoted definition of immersion in digital experiences frames the phenomenon as "the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus" (p. 98). Once again, the focus is on perception and the senses, and the metaphorical dimension of the term 'immersion' is leveraged to convey the sense of being surrounded by an environment that is ontologically distinct and separate from one's own.

Such a purely sensory understanding of immersion in virtual worlds is untenable. It collapses the distinction between virtual worlds and other forms of what Oliver Grau termed "virtual art" (Grau 2003), a historical tradition of sensorially enveloping spaces of illusory representation he traces from the frescoes of the Villa dei Misteri in Pompeii, through nineteenth-century panoramas and to 3D and IMAX cinema. What sets virtual worlds, and their user's experience of them, aside from the experience of the panorama or 3D film viewer - as sensorially immersive as those films might be - is the fact that, that, through incorporation in the figure of the avatar, virtual worlds afford the user "extranoematic habitation" (Calleja 2011). The virtual world user is granted a presence as a virtual body in the virtual world, able to act, be acted upon, relate to other entities, pursue projects, and so on.

Other framings of immersion in game studies have nuanced this purely sensory or perceptual understanding. Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä, in their model of gameplay experience, do account for "sensory immersion" as a primary dimension, but supplement it with "challenge-based immersion" and "imaginative immersion," to refer, respectively, to the engagement deriving from the fit between the player's abilities and the game's challenge, and to engagement with the game's fictional world and the characters inhabiting it (2005). Alison McMahan counters what she describes as the technologically deterministic idea that greater sensory fidelity of representation results in greater immersion, positing instead three criteria for immersion in games that have to do less with what is audiovisually given to the player's senses and more with the consistency and reactivity of the virtual world, namely: "(1) the user's expectations of the game or environment must match the environment's conventions fairly closely; (2) the user's actions must have a non-trivial impact on the environment; and (3) the conventions of the world must be consistent" (2003, p. 68-69). Jan-Noël Thon, meanwhile, argues for a conceptualisation of "the computer game player's experience of psychological immersion as resulting from a shift of attention to and the construction of situation models of certain parts of the game" (2008, p. 33): in other words, immersion, in this psychological rather than purely sensory sense, describes an orientation towards the game as an experiential context within which the player perceives themselves to exist.

Building upon such approaches that go beyond a purely sensory understanding of immersion, our claim is that, if immersion refers to the sense of being in the virtual world, then the question of 'being in virtual worlds' is intrinsically tied to the concept of immersion. It is a question that, we believe, requires an existential approach (see also Gualeni & Vella 2020). Adopting an existential perspective, the sense of being in, and towards, the virtual world is anchored in what we could term 'existential immersion' – the sense of having an existence within and towards the virtual world, of being responsible for one's freedom to perform (or not perform) virtual actions, of pursuing virtual projects, of personal investment of time and effort towards achieving those projects, of relations of care towards entities and states in the virtual world, and of being able to change the virtual world in ways that leave traces of one's own being within it. By this understanding, immersion in a virtual environment is a result of an existential anchoring in such an environment - a more complete feeling of inhabiting the virtual world founded upon a sense of purposeful involvement. Such an understanding of immersion, then, links the notion of 'being in virtual worlds' with notions such as care, relatedness, personal investment, and existential meaning.

The application of existential philosophy to the study of virtual worlds is not new. Within game studies, "existential ludology," a term originally coined by Matthew Thomas Payne (2008), has been used to refer to a body of theoretical work that adopts a perspective informed by existential philosophy upon players' experience of the virtual worlds of digital games. Work in this vein (Leino 2010; Möring 2013; 2019; Vella 2015; Kania 2017) has made the argument that digital game worlds constitute existential situations for their players that can be understood as analogues to, or reflections in miniature of, the existential situation constituted for us by the actual world. Notions like the "gameplay condition" (Leino 2010), the "ludic subject-position" (Vella 2015) and the "gameplay situation" (Kania 2017)

conceptualise the mutually constitutive relationship between the player and the gameworld: it is in relation to the facticity of the gameworld that the player's being-in-the-gameworld gains a distinct shape and figure, but, at the same time, the gameworld only becomes a meaningful world for the player - that is, from the player's perspective, and in relation to the existential orientation the player adopts within it.

In our previous work (Gualeni and Vella 2020), we have built upon the insights of existential ludology, extending the framework and conceptual toolkit developed in this branch of game studies to the study of virtual worlds more generally. In doing so, we do not intend to erase the specificities of digital games as virtual environments and experiences - whether such specificities derive from the formal characteristics of these virtual environments, or the ludic disposition with which they are approached - but rather to highlight the existential structures shared across virtual worlds in any form.

A comprehensive summary of this existential approach to virtual worlds is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, a brief overview of a number of key concepts will be useful as a foundation for developing an understanding of existential immersion in virtual worlds. Firstly, the notion of a 'virtual subjectivity' refers to the subjective sense of self that pertains to one's being-in-the-virtual-world (Gualeni and Vella 2020, xxx) - in other words, to the 'I in the virtual world' as experienced by the user. The idea of a virtual subjectivity follows on directly from the premise that virtual environments are taken up as an existential situation and experienced a a 'world' by their users - a world in which and that this is only possible if the user is situated as a subject in relation to the virtual world in question, that is, as a member of that world. A key characteristic of a virtual subjectivity is that it is a nested subjectivity, being subordinate to, and existing in relation to, one's actual subjectivity and the existential projects and dispositions that constitute it.

Secondly, a defining characteristic of virtual subjectivity is its projectual nature. In line with Jean-Paul Sartre's argument that one's being takes the form of an existential project - a "project of being" (1966, 722) towards which one orients their goals and actions - virtual subjectivities are similarly projectually structured, given a form by the purposes one adopts within the virtual world.

Of course, the adoption of this project in the virtual world as one's own, for the duration of one's engagement with a virtual subjectivity, requires a degree of psychological investment in the virtual subjectivity in question - while engaging with a virtual world, the virtual subjectivity I adopt is 'myself,' and the projects I take on within the virtual world are 'mine.' The fact that such psychological, emotional and affective investment can exceed the boundaries of the virtual world and affect one's actual subjectivity - a phenomenon referred to as 'bleed' (Waern 2010) - demonstrates the degree of involvement users of a virtual world can have, and the extent to which they can come to care about (and for) their virtual subjectivity, their virtual projects, and the entities within the virtual world towards which they orient their being.

On the basis of what we discussed in the previous section, it should be evident that in the current academic discourse in game studies, virtual worlds research, and media studies the notion of immersion is largely understood as the feeling of being surrounded by an environment which is different from the one we customarily inhabit and experience as biological creatures. This understanding of immersion (which is often referred to as "sensory immersion", see Laurel 1991; Murray 1997) is thus focused on understanding how our perceptions play into the persistent and believable feeling of being somewhere else and/or someone else. As discussed above, the approach focused on "sensory immersion" is certainly efficient in capturing many dimensions of our involved experience of virtual worlds, and particularly so when it comes to our phenomenological relationships with them: the persistency of the experience, the granularity of it, the responsiveness of the environment, the sensation of immediacy that characterises it etc. Notwithstanding the usefulness of the outlined approaches in contexts such as the design of virtual experiences or as analytical tools for game studies, the focus on sensory immersion can certainly be deemed to be merely capturing a partial view on the wider horizon that constitutes the way we conceptualise immersion.

Although wider and more multidimensional approaches to immersion in digital games do exist (for example as discussed by Ermi and Mäyrä 2005), in this chapter we argue that if immersion broadly refers to the sense of being in a virtual world, then the question of what it means to 'be in virtual worlds' emerges as a surprisingly overlooked analytical component. As we explained in finer detail elsewhere (see Vella & Gualeni 2019; Gualeni & Vella 2020), that is a question that also benefits from – or might even downright require – an approach that is informed by the philosophical current of existentialism. In this chapter, we aim to demonstrate that the adoption of an existential perspective on the way we understand our engagement with a virtual world transcends and complements the current phenomenological focus of how we understand immersion. With that objective in mind, we introduce the notion of 'existential immersion' to indicate the sense of inhabiting a virtual world and having the possibility to develop existential relationships within and towards the virtual world. Among the most common existential relationships that one can formulate when inhabiting a virtual world are the freedom to perform (or not perform) virtual actions, the possibility to formulate projects to be pursued within that world, the capability to invest time and effort towards achieving those projects, to develop relations of care towards entities and states in the virtual world, and to be able to effect changes on the virtual world in ways that also serve as traces of one's own being within it[1].

From the perspective we are proposing, the idea of immersion in a virtual world is thus understood as the result of an existential anchoring within it, identifying notions such as relatedness, personal investment, and self-construction (and self-transformation) as components of how we exist within and towards virtual worlds (Leino 2010; Möring 2013; 2019; Kania 2017; Vella & Gualeni 2019; Gualeni & Vella 2020). Accordingly, in this essay

[1] For a wider and more detailed account of our possible existential relationships with virtual worlds, we invite the reader to consult our 2020 book *Virtual Existentialism*.

we will home in on the sense of inhabiting artificial worlds and belonging in them with particular attention on how those feelings emerge from our relatedness to other beings in that world, from the pursuit and fulfilment of personal projects within it, and from the personal meanings that we attribute to these beings and projects. As we will explain, and in line with Martin Heidegger's existential phenomenology, we consider 'care' to be the foundational mode of being in common to all the relationships mentioned above. As such, the next section of this chapter will introduce an understanding of the notion of care that resonates with the philosophical current of existentialism. After having introduced that of care, we will examine our experiences of virtual worlds through its lens.

On the notion of care and its existential significance

The notion of care has an uncertain etymological origin, which is also reflected in the ambiguity of its current use in the English language. On the one hand we have the negative connotations implied in its Germanic roots, testified by how the Old English *caru* or *cearu* and the High German *chara* indicate something related to grief and lamentation. In this connotation, which manifests itself in modern English expressions such as "being burdened with cares," we call a 'care' something that is worrisome, something that causes trouble and anxiety (Burdach 1923). On the other hand, the Latin origins of the term care (*cura*) imply a particular – and particularly positive – kind of attention that is directed towards providing safety or protection for something or somebody (Burdach 1923; Reich 1995: 319-320).

As already explained, the philosophical tradition of existentialism is the preferential lens through which we intend to approach and use the idea of care in this chapter with the aim of transcending and complementing the current academic discourse on immersion. In existential literature, an understanding of care appears in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard. In his posthumous fragments, in fact, the Danish philosopher distinguishes between two uses of our intellectual faculties: disinterested reflection and consciousness. While the former focuses on thoughts that are objective or hypothetical and require no personal involvement on the part of the thinker, the second approach entails interest and care for its objects of inquiry (Kierkegaard 1987: loc. 146). In the few passages where Kierkegaard talked about this kind of personal concern, he did not posit a difference between forms of care that are deliberately pursued from kinds of care that are, instead, imposed on us. From Kierkegaard's perspective, for example, there would be no difference in care between the cares that one picks for oneself (for example the decision to adopt a pet or to look after 'sims'[2]), and those that one finds oneself involved in (such as having to deal with a congenital disease). As we will explain later, this distinction might be impossible to establish neatly in our perspective and might not be particularly relevant for the kind of argument we are presenting here.

About eighty-five years after Kierekegaard's, one of the most momentous understandings of the notion of care in existential philosophy was offered by Martin Heidegger. Unlike

[2] A sim is a simulated person that inhabits the virtual world of *The Sims*, a series of life-simulation videogames developed by Maxis and published by Electronic Arts (2000 - present).

Kierkegaard, in his 1927 magnum opus *Being and Time*, Heidegger wrote extensively about care, which is explicitly treated as a central theme of his philosophical project. For him, care is defined by aspects of both anxiety and solicitude. In *Being and Time*, these two aspects feature as fundamental, albeit conflicting, dimensions of one's 'being in the world' (Heidegger 1973). In relation to the first dimension, Heidegger uses the term *Sorge* (worrisome care) to indicate our innate need to struggle for survival and for favourable standing among our fellow human beings. *Sorge* is thus an aspect of our being that is not concerned with the significance of our temporality and the meaning we attribute to our finite existence: by immersing ourselves in the conventionality and triviality of human affairs, according to Heidegger, we tend to "conceal from ourselves the question of the meaning of being, and in the process truncate our humanity as well" (Heidegger 1973; Ogletree 1985: 23). The second dimension of care is discussed, in *Being and Time*, as that of an active "caring for" (*Fürsorge*). This other component of care appears to have, instead, a central existential value, and expresses itself in acts of nurturing, of caring for the Earth and for our fellow human beings as opposed to merely 'taking care of' them (Heidegger 1973)[3]. In a way that matches our observations concerning Kierkegaard's understanding of care, we believe it is important to emphasise that even in Heidegger's perspective we cannot neatly and definitively distinguish moments of care-as-anxiety from care-as-solicitude in our everyday being in the world (Ogletree 1985: 24). One could argue, for example, that deliberate and existentially relevant forms of care are also defined by aspects of anxiety and circumstantiality. For instance, one might decide to adopt and take care of a child and be faced, in that process, with various forms of social pressure as well as anxiety-driven decisions. Conversely, one could claim that Heidegger's understanding of *Sorge* is imbricated in multiple ways (including linguistically) in his conceptualization of *Fürsorge*. One might, as an example, be "burdened with cares" for a sick parent, and yet decide to care for that parent in ways that are not insignificant in an existential sense: as an occasion for emotional connection, for example, or as a moment of personal growth.

These ambiguous situations are helpful in demonstrating that the task of untangling the question of care in terms of dichotomies such as 'deliberate vs. accidental', or 'genuine vs. inauthentic' might not be a productive (or even a possible) one for us to pursue in this chapter or potentially at all.

One distinction that, instead, could be necessary for understanding the specific forms of care that can emerge in our engagement with virtual worlds is the one between *caring about* and *caring for* something or someone. Both these forms presuppose an understanding of care as solicitude directed towards something or someone. In the first case (*caring about*), the attentiveness of care does not express itself actively, but as a feeling or a disposition. This is the kind of concern that, for example, we can direct towards a victim of a serious accident

[3] Like Heidegger, the Stoic philosopher Seneca (4 BCE-65 CE) considered caring for something or someone to be a determining factor in the process of becoming truly human (Reich 1995). For Seneca, both humans and God are endowed with the rational faculties that are necessary for actively pursuing the good. Whereas for God the understanding of what is good is innate, caring is – for humans – a key component in perfecting their understanding of the good (Seneca 1953: 443-444).

that we hear in the news, or for characters and entities that we encounter in works of fiction such as a novel or a film. In the second case (*caring for*), we align with Heidegger in considering *caring for* to be a form of solicitude that, differently from the first case, is deliberately and actively pursued by the carer. In other words, while *caring about* something is a necessary prerequisite for *caring for* that certain something, the latter is what puts the former into practice.

In discussing existential immersion in virtual worlds and forms of care that are specific to the active engagement with artificial environments and artificial beings, we will focus on forms of care that match our category of *caring for*. As presented above, in fact, forms of caring for something or someone correspond to deliberate actions and personal projects that one can choose to take up in the actual world as well as interactive artificial ones such as virtual worlds and gameworlds. Besides, aspects of *caring about* in relation to fiction as well as interactive fiction are already extensively discussed in fields such as the philosophy of imagination and the philosophy of fiction (see, among others, Kendall Walton's [1990] idea of quasi-emotions or Nele Van de Mosselaer's concept of imaginary desires [2020]). Non-active forms of care are – therefore – outside our immediate interest in this chapter.

As an initial foray into the idea of existential immersion, we will not try to cover extensively all forms of care that can emerge and can be expressed within a virtual world. We will focus, for now, on forms of care that are expressed through actions. Within this subset, we posit an additional restriction: we will not discuss forms of care that have a teleological aspiration in the actual world[4]. By that we mean solicitous actions and projects that, albeit expressed and carried out in a virtual world, serve a purpose in the actual world. An example of such behaviour could be identified in the use of computer flight simulators with the purpose of training and education: the activities and projects carried out in those virtual worlds will not be directed towards one's virtual subjectivity, but towards one's actual one. Another example of those forms of care with extrinsic motivations could be recognized in one's striving to win in a competitive multiplayer game with intentions that relate to the actual world such as earning actual money or annoying or humiliating one's human opponent. Similarly, one's obtaining and showing off rare in-game gear is typically pursued to demonstrate one's commitment and devotion to a certain videogame (and, relatedly, to signal one's status or one's belonging within a certain community of players). Once again, while those activities and projects presuppose a concerned commitment to the virtual world in question, some of the aspects of care expressed in that world also (if not mainly) contribute to one's existence in the actual world. And so, while on the one hand we acknowledge the impossibility of neatly separating forms of caring for that one directs towards virtual beings and activities from existential concerns, desires, and inclinations that characterise one's actual life (Taylor 2006; Malaby 2007), we still believe it is productive for our present goals to exclude the latter from our analysis. As already mentioned, with this being an initial exploration of the role of care in

[4] In this chapter we use the adjective 'actual' to indicate things or events that are currently the case in the world we natively belong to as biological creatures.

existential immersion, we consider the exclusion of extrinsically motivated forms of *caring for* to be desirable to keep our argument simple and intuitively accessible.

If we exclude forms of caring that are inactive, imaginary, or driven by extrinsic motivations, what forms of directed solicitude in virtual worlds will be considered in this chapter? In this chapter we identify three forms of actively caring for virtual entities.

> 1 - Caring for the successful continuation of our being-in-that-world (i.e. actively ensuring that our avatar survives and thrives in the virtual world)
>
> 2 - Caring for one's in-game comportment (i.e. concerning ourselves with the kind of subjectivity that one constructs and enacts within the virtual world in question)
>
> 3 - Caring for the virtual world (i.e. a relational form of care directed towards beings and events that take place within a virtual world).

In the three sections that follow, we will explain what qualifies these forms of care, in which ways they relate to the philosophical tradition of existentialism, and finally provide some practical examples of how these forms of solicitude are at work in our engagement with virtual worlds.

Caring for the successful continuation of our being-in-that-world

The first form of care emerges in particular in relation to interactive, artificial worlds that impose on its user what Olli Tapio Leino calls a 'gameplay condition'. Inspired by existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, and in particular by his notion of the 'human condition', Leino labels the various ways in which our situation within a gameworld resists the player's actions and projects as our 'gameplay condition' (2009). For Sartre (2007: 42-44), the 'human condition' indicates certain aspects of life that every human is born with and does not have control over (for example the fact that humans are going to eat, sleep, and breathe, or the fact that we are born in a certain place, within a certain historical period, culture, class, etc.). While it is true that the human condition characterises the existence of every human being as a set of influential factors in shaping their aspirations and existential trajectories, Sartre emphasises that it cannot be considered an absolute limitation to our freedom to develop ourselves, and cannot prevent us from making existentially-relevant choices. In his wake, Leino observes that our being in a gameworld is similarly challenged and resisted by a 'gameplay condition' in relation to which the player is constantly asked to make significant decisions and to take corresponding actions. Those decisions and actions result in outcomes that might or might not allow a player to continue their engagement with that world.

This first form of care is, thus, perhaps one of the most basic and fundamental, as it emerges from the conditionality of our being-in-the-virtual-world (see Möring 2019). It is a kind of concern that is experienced in a way that is particularly obvious in our engagement with

virtual worlds that inscribe certain goals to our being in that world and imposes criteria for success and survival within it. Particularly glaring examples of such contexts are the virtual worlds of videogames and training simulations. In them, the player often needs to understand and internalise the care-logic of the game in order to be able to continue to exist and perform within its world. The care-logic inscribed in a gameworld is easily comparable to Heidegger's understanding of an insincere and anxious form of care (*Sorge*) that, as discussed above, is primarily concerned with thriving and surviving in the world.

Making sure that our character's gear is in good order, that one proceeds with caution in unknown areas of the gameworld, that one does not leave one's back open to threats or that one has enough healing items are just some examples of how our in-game behaviour is often oriented towards caring for our in-game avatars in a way that ensures the continuation of our being-there.

Caring for one's in-game comportment

Beyond the basic care devoted to ensuring the continuation of one's being in the virtual world - and once this level of care is satisfied as a necessary prerequisite for other forms of care to be possible - we can also consider, as a second dimension of care in the virtual world, care for one's virtual project.

As we have already mentioned, for Sartre, one's being-in-the-world takes a projectual character. Every individual finds themselves within an "existential situation" (1966, 127) - a particular contingent arrangement of material and socio-cultural facts that constitutes their reality: having a body of a particular biological sex and which might be marked by certain congenital traits, being born in a particular country, social class and family situation, and so on. At the same time, this situation does not, and cannot, fully define our being - we are always aware that there is more to us, that we are not 'just' an externally determined entity, but have the freedom to choose how to take up this situation. This freedom means that we project ourselves beyond the contingent determination of our situation, and towards who we want to be, making our existence a "project of being" (ibid., 722).

There is, thus, an element of care of the self inherent to the idea of the existential project - not in the basic sense of self-preservation, but in the sense of projecting, nurturing, and pursuing an ideal or desired self, and making choices and sacrifices and putting in the necessary work to ensure this self is maintained. On this point, a link can be drawn between the idea of the project of being and the Foucauldian notion of self-fashioning (Foucault 1982; 1988).

With digital games, attention has been paid to the way gameplay can become a technology of the self in this Foucauldian sense, allowing for virtual self-fashioning or subject formation through the enactment of a particular play style (Parker 2013; Zhu 2018; Kalmanlehto 2019). Given that, as we have already pointed out, virtual subjectivities are nested subjectivities, adopted within, and sustained by practices performed from the perspective of one's actual subjectivity, it stands to reason that adopting a particular virtual project of being - and, hence,

a particular mode of being-in a particular virtual world - serves some existential function from the perspective of the individual's actual subjectivity. The curation and fashioning of a virtual self, for instance, can serve to reflect, affirm, and enact the values, ideologies and practices that one identifies as one's own.

Michelle Westerlaken's account of playing the open-world role-playing game *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017) as a vegan is one example of a virtual subjectivity enacted to reflect and express an individual's values. The choice not to hunt animals, consume food made with animal-derived ingredients, or wear leather armour imposes a set of constraints that make progress towards the game's goals more difficult, but allows for a virtual subjectivity that reflects a project of being based upon a set of voluntarily chosen values.

Of course, reflecting the values by which an individual defines themselves outside the virtual world is not the only use to which a virtual subjectivity could be put. It is just as plausible to consider possibilities of individuals choosing to invest themselves in virtual subjectivities that diverge from the values, practices, styles and ways of being that define their everyday selves. In such cases, a different existential function is being served - for instance, allowing the individual to explore ways of being and subject-positions that are not generally encompassed by their existential situation in the actual world, in a manner which might prove to be transformative through the foregrounding of latent possibilities in the individual's being.

What these examples also demonstrate is that subjectivity and selfhood (virtual or otherwise) and the pursuit of an existential project are inherently worldly matters. Caring for one's virtual subjectivity involves adopting particular ways of being-in-the-virtual-world, and defining oneself through particular patterns of relations to entities within the virtual world. The idea of existential immersion comes back into view here: the user's engagement with the virtual world is in part motivated by this care for their virtual subjectivity, and the way of being-in-the-virtual-world that fashioning and maintaining this virtual self demands.

Caring for the virtual world

A third mode of care that pertains to being in virtual worlds is care for the virtual world itself, and the entities within it. Unlike the two forms of care in virtual worlds we have already discussed, then, this is an other-oriented care structure - the user is directed towards, and engages in relations of care with, one or more of the entities encountered by their virtual subjectivity within the virtual world.

This form of care is perhaps most evident in digital games like *Lemmings* (DMA Design 1991), *The Sims* (Maxis 1999) or *Black & White* (Lionhead 2001), which task the player with watching over, and caring for, one or more entities in their respective gameworld whose survival and well-being depend on the player's attention and intervention. These games, however, position the player in a disembodied, transcendent subject-position, ontologically

and experientially separate from, and superordinate to, the virtual world - the fact that they are often categorised as ‘god games’ in terms of their ludic genre is indicative in this regard.

Nonetheless, even if we remain in the field of digital game worlds, we can find a number of examples of this form of care structuring an embodied virtual subjectivity. The action-adventure game *Ico* (Team Ico 2001), for example, establishes a relation of care between the player, as embodied in the avatar of the titular horned boy, and Yorda, the mysterious girl he encounters as he tries to escape the castle he has been imprisoned in. Throughout the course of the game, the player has to ensure Yorda’s safety, fighting off the spectral shadow beings that show up at certain points and threaten to abduct her. Accordingly, the player’s virtual subjectivity takes the form of a protector and caretaker. The player is likely to maintain physical proximity to Yorda whenever possible, a practice the game facilitates through the affordance of keeping the controller’s shoulder button pressed to hold Yorda’s hand. Conversely, whenever a task requires the player to temporarily leave Yorda behind and lose sight of her, they are likely to experience a sense of anxiety resulting from their awareness of the responsibility of care they hold.

A broader, more distributed form of caring for one’s fellow entities in the virtual world can be observed in the social simulation game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020). Here, the player’s inhabitation of their virtual island village home is, to a great degree, oriented not only towards the goal of gathering resources, improving their virtual home and completing their collections of fossils, bugs and marine fauna, but also towards practising and demonstrating care towards their neighbours, through offering aid whenever they ask for help with a task, regularly presenting them with gifts, and so on. This relation of care can also extend to the island itself - the player can be motivated to regularly remove unwanted weeds, plant flower beds and fruit trees, and lay out paths, bridges, seats and decorative items. Given the game’s multiplayer functionality - the player is able to invite their actual friends to visit and spend time on their island - this dimension of caring for the virtual world can also bleed into the existential task of caring for one’s friends, and wanting to create a virtual home in which these friends can feel welcome.

Conclusions

In this chapter, it has been our claim that an intrinsic component of our sense of immersion in virtual worlds is the feeling of relating to, or being invested in, these virtual worlds - feelings of relatedness and investment that shape our virtual subjectivities within these virtual worlds.

In a way which has, to date, been notably under-examined, immersion in virtual worlds depends not simply upon being experientially present in these worlds in a sensorially upheld manner. Just as vital to the sense of immersion in virtual worlds - and, indeed, what constitutes them as ‘worlds,’ in an experiential sense, in the first place - is the fact that the user is enmeshed in networks of relation and care, towards the preservation and projectual self-fashioning of their virtual subjectivity, and towards the virtual world itself, and the entities of which it is constituted.

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