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**VIRTUAL WORLDS AND THEIR CHALLENGE
TO PHILOSOPHY:
UNDERSTANDING THE “INTRAVIRTUAL” AND
THE “EXTRAVIRTUAL”**

JOHNNY HARTZ SØRAKER

Abstract: The Web, in particular real-time interactions in three-dimensional virtual environments (virtual worlds), comes with a set of unique characteristics that leave our traditional frameworks inapplicable. The present article illustrates this by arguing that the notion of “technology relations,” as put forward by Ihde and Verbeek, becomes inapplicable when it comes to the Internet, and this inapplicability shows why these phenomena require new philosophical frameworks. Against this background, and more constructively, the article proposes a fundamental distinction between “intravirtual” and “extravirtual” consequences—a distinction that allows us to understand and conceptualize real-time interactions online more accurately. By relating this distinction to Searle’s notion of “condition of satisfaction,” the article also shows its implications for judging real-time, online interactions in virtual worlds as irrational and/or immoral. The ultimate purpose is to illustrate how new philosophical concepts and frameworks can allow us to better account for the unique characteristics of the Internet.

Keywords: virtual worlds, Web3D, technology relations, Searle, philosophy of computing.

Introduction

The Internet has changed our lives radically, and probably much more than we realize. For pretty much any concept entertained in the history of philosophy, the Internet has caused myriad conceptual muddles (Moor 1985) and brought with it a dramatic re-ontologization (Floridi 2005) of the world towards increasingly digital, as opposed to analogue, entities, events, and experiences. To illustrate, it should suffice to name the challenges posed by the Web to just some of the most basic concepts in philosophy: the notion of “space” is challenged by the way in which the Web creates new spaces for actions and events to unfold, the notion of “time” is challenged by its increasing disentanglement from physical distance, the notion of agency is challenged by “bots” and other artificial agents, and the notion of mind itself is challenged by the way in which

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many cognitive functions such as memory become causally intertwined with (and increasingly dependent on) instantly available information online (Clark and Chalmers 1998).

Although the Web has had a profound and probably underappreciated effect on most if not all aspects of our lives, we have certainly seen dramatic changes brought about by earlier technologies as well, including the familiar examples of the telescope, the steam engine, and the pre-Web computer. Many of these changes have also corresponded to changing the agenda of philosophers, as evidenced by the intertwining of philosophy of mind with developments in artificial intelligence. In an attempt to understand how technology can change our relation to the world, numerous philosophers have also tried to develop new theoretical frameworks. Two complementary and influential frameworks have been developed by post-phenomenologists Don Ihde (1990) and Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005), and their approaches try to shed light on different ways in which technology changes the relationship between the subject and its lifeworld. In this article, I argue that these frameworks are incapable of dealing with the radical yet subtle way in which the Internet changes our relation to the world and others, and through this analysis attempt to show both the uniqueness of the Internet as a technology and the challenge it poses to some of our most fundamental philosophical notions. Furthermore, I introduce an important distinction between what I refer to as “extravirtual” and “intravirtual,” which allows us to better conceptualize actions and events that are made possible by the Internet, and which also sheds light on why it is (or should be) so difficult to arrive at an observer-independent ethics for online behaviour.

In order to make this analysis as clear as possible, it is necessary to narrow the scope somewhat, since “the Web” is an enormously multifaceted concept. Although I believe that the discussion below is relevant to many aspects of the Internet, I focus on real-time interactions in three-dimensional environments, since this is the type of Internet technology where the phenomena that I discuss can be most clearly seen. By “virtual world” I refer to computer-simulated, interactive, multi-user, three-dimensional environments, where users can interact with each other by means of graphical representations of themselves (“avatars”). Although virtual worlds are primarily developed as stand-alone applications that are, strictly speaking, not part of the Web, there is a strong push in the industry towards embedding virtual worlds in Web browsers in order to lower the threshold for new, casual customers. Second Life (*Project Sky-light*) and Google (*Lively*) have already experimented with a Web browser implementation, but both projects failed due to lack of standards and browser support. Because of these kinds of problems, the Web3D Consortium was founded with the purpose to “create and encourage market deployment of open, royalty-free standards that enable the communication of real-time 3D across applications, networks, and XML web

services.”¹ This consortium and recent developments towards 3D capabilities in Microsoft’s *Silverlight* and Adobe’s *Flash* are strong indicators that virtual worlds will increasingly become part of the Web proper. Although in the remainder of this article I refer to “virtual worlds,” since this is where the phenomena I am interested in can most clearly be seen at present, it seems likely that the full impact of these phenomena will only become widespread when these virtual worlds can be accessed directly from the Web browser.

Narrowing the scope in this manner allows us to partly bracket the fact that “the Internet” will typically entail a mesh of online and offline practices that can hardly be separated. Although I agree that there is usually no “magic circle” (Huizinga 2003) surrounding the virtual, “virtual worlds” are probably as close as we get to having some kind of “membrane” between real and virtual, in so far as virtual worlds allow us to create and maintain relationships entirely independent from our offline lives. As a first step towards understanding the uniqueness of virtual worlds, and the lessons to be learned in philosophy, I will show how some of the traditional frameworks for making sense of how technology alters our relationship to the world become inapplicable to virtual worlds—and that this inapplicability is in itself revealing of its unique characteristics.

Post-Phenomenology and Technology Relations

In his influential *Technology and the Lifeworld* (1990), Ihde conceptualizes four different ways in which technologies mediate between humans and the world. First, some technologies become *embodied*, meaning that the technology in question alters the way in which we perceive the world without the technology itself being explicitly present; the technology “disappears” into the background when it is being used. Typical examples include glasses, microscopes, and telescopes, which allow us to perceive (parts of) the world we would not otherwise see, without noticing the technologies that make this possible. Second, technologies can form an *alterity* relation, in which we interact with the technology itself as an Other—leaving *the world* more or less in the background. Typical examples of alterity relations include the withdrawal of money from an ATM or interacting with a robot. Third, some technologies form part of a *hermeneutic* relation, in which a part or feature of the world can be read (and in some cases interpreted) by human beings by means of a technology. A standard example given for such a relation is the thermometer, which “hermeneutically delivers” a representation of a particular

¹ “WEB3D Consortium Process Summary and Guidelines.” Retrieved March 2, 2012, from http://www.web3d.org/files/documents/Web3D_Process_Summary_and_Guidelines_Apr05.pdf.

aspect of the world. Finally, Ihde also introduces *background* relations, where the technology is not perceived directly but becomes “a kind of near-technological environment itself” (Ihde 1990, 108). The most obvious examples include the kinds of technologies that surround us in everyday life, such as technologies for lighting, heating, air conditioning, and so on.

Ihde’s relations make intuitive sense for many, if not most, types of traditional technology, but they sometimes come up short when it comes to new and emerging technologies—including virtual worlds, which I will return to shortly. Due to the limits of Ihde’s analysis, Verbeek (2008) proposes two other types of technology relations. First, in some cases, the relation between human and technology is much closer than that of Ihde’s “embodiment” relations. For instance, not only do neural implants and other bionic technologies become embodied in the sense of not being directly perceived, the technology “physically alters the human” (Verbeek 2008, 391). Verbeek dubs this the “cyborg relation.” Another technology relation introduced by Verbeek is the “composite relation,” in which technologies not only represent a phenomenon in the world but *construct* reality instead. For instance, a radio telescope generates an image comprehensible by humans on the basis of detecting radiation that is invisible to the eye. This is not merely a form of bringing what is far away closer or enlarging microscopic entities; these technologies construct that which cannot be perceived by humans—and sometimes generate a representation in an entirely different modality as well, for instance by making sounds visible.

All of the technology relations outlined above can be illustrated in the form of arrows and dashes. In Ihde’s original formulation, the dashes constitute what he refers to as *enigma* positions (Ihde 1990, 86–87).² These enigma positions are points where the relation may break down in one way or another—or simply the point where the technologies themselves may malfunction. For instance, if glasses break, they no longer form an embodiment relation between the human and the world, and if a thermometer stops functioning, it no longer forms a hermeneutic relation between the human and the world. We can illustrate Ihde and Verbeek’s technology relations as in table 1.

The combined conceptualizations of Ihde and Verbeek help explain a range of different technologies, but can they shed light on the ways in which the Web—and virtual worlds in particular—change the relationship between subjects, and between subjects and reality?

² Verbeek removes Ihde’s dashes in his two additional relations. In the cyborg relation, this makes sense in a somewhat disturbing manner, since a breakdown of the technology will destroy not only the relation but the human-technology hybrid itself. There seems, however, as if there should be an enigma position between technology and world in the composite relation.

TABLE 1. Technology relations according to Ihde and Verbeek

Technology relation	Schematization	Examples	Author
Embodiment relation	(Human – technology) → world	Glasses	Ihde
Hermeneutic relation	Human → (technology – world)	Thermometer	
Alterity relation	Human → technology (– world)	ATM	
Background relation	Human (– technology – world)	Air conditioner	
Cyborg relation	(Human/technology) → world	Neural implant	Verbeek
Composite relation	Human → (technology → world)	Radio telescope	

Applying Technology Relations to Virtual Worlds

When we try to apply these relations to virtual worlds and entities, we quickly find ourselves in trouble—but these problems are in themselves interesting because they reveal part of what is so unique about virtual worlds. One initial problem is that the distinction between “technology” and “world” featured in Ihde and Verbeek’s relations becomes complicated when we talk about virtual worlds. We might propose to have “world” refer exclusively to the *physical* world, but this leads to a couple of peculiar problems. First, since we use technologies (computers and peripherals) to access virtual worlds, are these technologies part of the mediation between the human being and the virtual world? Second, how do we conceptualize technologies *within* the virtual world itself? If we look at the examples given above, it seems that all of Ihde’s relations can be applied to virtual entities *within* virtual worlds as well: there are virtual glasses, virtual meters of various sorts, virtual ATMs, and virtual lighting. Are these entities part of the virtual-world-as-technology, or are they themselves technologies within another technology? It could be argued that we do not directly interact with these technologies, but reducing a virtual world to our interaction with the computer and peripherals hardly makes sense.

To make matters even worse, the virtual world can be seen as a form of hermeneutic technology as well, because it does mediate the physical world—in particular, the actions of *other* human beings. To illustrate this, take a regular computer game that does not allow for online multiplayer. Such games can be considered as a form of *alterity* relation, because we interact with the technology while the world is more or less in brackets. With virtual worlds (i.e., when there is an online multiplayer element), the world is no longer bracketed because we communicate with actual human beings through the virtual world/technology. This, in turn, is seamlessly combined with all kinds of *non-human* “alters” within the virtual world. Finally, as if the notions of “technology” and “world” are not difficult enough to place in these relations, the concept of “human” is also complicated by the fact that the interactions are carried out *as if* done by a

representation of the human (an “avatar”), and done from the standpoint of that avatar’s indexical location within the world/technology.

In short, with virtual worlds the relation in the technology relations of Ihde and Verbeek become ambiguous. “Human” may refer to the actual human or to the avatar representation. “Technology” may refer to the user’s computer and peripherals, the computer simulation and databases that underpin the virtual worlds, the virtual world itself (as experienced), and/or virtual entities within virtual worlds. Finally, “world” can refer to the actual or the virtual world.

At first glance, it may seem that Verbeek’s composite relation is a promising way of conceptualizing virtual worlds as essentially *constructing* reality. This is partly correct if we regard the virtual world as mediating computer states (encoded strings of binary digits) as unobservable aspects of the physical world. However, this fails to capture the relation between two humans interacting with each other through a virtual world. Although it may be technically correct to describe virtual worlds as constructing that which cannot be experienced as such (i.e., the underlying computer states), this misses the *experience* of being immersed in a virtual world and of communicating with another human being by way of avatars—and losing the subjective experience seems particularly unfortunate from a (post-)phenomenological point of view.

The considerations above are not intended merely as a criticism of Ihde and Verbeek. They simply show that virtual worlds and entities probably cannot be conceptualized in the same manner as many, if not most, other technologies. Virtual worlds are both worlds and technologies, the computer simulation is both the underpinning of the virtual world and the means of mediation, entities within virtual worlds can be regarded as technologies themselves, and although virtual worlds mediate the physical world and other human beings, they *also* construct reality. All of this complexity shows how unique virtual worlds are—and how difficult it is to conceptualize the relations between humans, virtual worlds, and the physical world. Thus, we need to simplify and focus on a few, particularly important ways in which virtual worlds are related to other human beings and the physical world. I will do this by way of the terms “extravirtual” and “intravirtual” and will then show how this distinction illustrates the uniqueness of virtual worlds.

Extravirtual and Intravirtual Consequences

One of the reasons why virtual worlds and entities are often considered mere play without any importance for our real lives stems from the belief that virtual entities and events have no effects in the physical world. In other words, there can be no direct *physical* harm coming from online communication, and thus any law or moral principle (implicitly) derived from the harm principle will be inapplicable. This is true if we

talk about virtual entities qua virtual, but it quickly becomes more complicated when we take into consideration that any change in the virtual world *necessarily* corresponds to changes in physical reality—that is, changes in the physical computer running the simulation. Thus, in making claims about the effects of virtual worlds on the actual world, we need to distinguish between the virtual entity as such and the causes of its existence.³ We must not forget that virtual entities are not mere products of the mind or illusions; they are generated and made inter-subjectively available by a computer according to a comprehensive set of regulative principles.

This gives rise to a peculiar feature of virtual worlds and entities, which is that the underlying computer simulation can produce effects both within the virtual world and outside it—and this effect can be caused by the same event. To illustrate this point, imagine a virtual world in which I throw a virtual rock that hits a virtual window. The virtual rock qua virtual does not have any mechanico-causal connection to the physical world, but the simulation is generated by a computer, which has both a physical existence and the capacity for causing even dramatic changes in the physical world. Consider, moreover, that breaking the virtual window triggers a certain computer state, which in turn triggers the detonation of a physical bomb. Does this mean that it was the virtual rock that caused the physical explosion? What happens is that the virtual event has two very different kinds of effects, what I refer to as *intravirtual* and *extravirtual* effects. By moving my physical body (extravirtual) in such a way that I throw a virtual rock (intravirtual), I am causing a change in the state of the computer running the simulation (extravirtual). This change of state, in turn, can further produce both intravirtual and extravirtual effects—respectively, the breaking of the virtual window (intravirtual) and the detonation of the bomb (extravirtual). The intravirtual effects are the effects I experience as being part of the virtual world, such as seeing the virtual window being shattered and hearing the corresponding sounds. We can describe these as events that are *congruent* with the virtual world as a whole. In technological terms, these correspond to particular visual stimuli presented through the monitor and sounds emitted through speakers or headphones—or if we speculate into the future of virtual worlds, the perceptual feedback from a head-mounted display and tactile stimuli from a body suit. The important point here is that although the virtual world as such is observer dependent, the computer states that underpin the virtual world and give rise to having a shared experience are themselves observer independent.

³ Another way to put it would be to distinguish between different levels of abstraction (cf. Floridi 1999). In this terminology, what I refer to as intravirtual would be the virtual level of abstraction, and extravirtual would be anything external to the virtual level, such as the computational, physical, or mental level of abstraction.

To get a better understanding of this, it is helpful to employ John Searle's terminology concerning intentionality and the conditions of satisfaction (Searle 1995, 2001).

Intravirtual Versus Extravirtual Conditions of Satisfaction

According to Searle, although beliefs and desires have a similar structure in virtue of being intentional states, their relation to the world falls into two diametrically opposite categories. Beliefs are true or false, whereas desires, intentions, hopes, and so on, are satisfied or frustrated. Searle's way of describing the difference is that in both cases we are talking about "conditions of satisfaction," but they have different "directions of fit." What this means is that for a *belief* to be satisfied, the belief must "fit" the world; it is the belief that must be adjusted so as to be in accordance with the world. For instance, my belief that it is raining is satisfied (i.e., true) if/when it is in fact raining. If it rains but I do not believe it is raining, it is the belief that needs to change so as to be in accordance with the world. For a *desire* (or similar intentional states) to be satisfied, however, it is not the desire that needs to change so as to fit the world, it is the world that must be adjusted so as to be in accordance with (fit) the desire. My desire that it should rain is satisfied if and only if the world changes so as to fit the desire. Thus, beliefs and desires have opposite directions of fit. In Searle's terminology, beliefs have a mind-to-world direction of fit, whereas desires have a world-to-mind direction of fit.⁴ One important implication of this is that the rationality of our beliefs and desires will be determined by where the conditions of satisfaction lie. It is perfectly rational for me to believe that Hamlet is the prince of Denmark as long as I restrict its condition of satisfaction to the works of Shakespeare, but it would be entirely irrational if the conditions of satisfaction lie in the actual world.

With this background, we can better clarify problems related to confusing the intravirtual and the extravirtual. First, some problems occur due to our being perfectly aware of the intravirtual and extravirtual consequences of our actions—but the two are in conflict with each other. Consider a man who has the desire to have a virtual relationship with a woman. This desire is imprecise unless it is specified where the condition of satisfaction lies. If the man desires to have a virtual relationship with someone who is a woman (only) in the virtual world, then the condition of

⁴ Searle's terminology can become messy at times, especially when he substitutes these terms for, respectively, the "upward" and "downward" directions of fit. I have found that the easiest way to remember the difference between mind-to-world and world-to-mind is to think of the former as "mind-must-conform-to-world" (i.e., beliefs must conform to, or become the same as, the state of affairs in the world in order to be true/satisfied) and of the latter as "world-must-conform-to-mind" (i.e., the state of affairs in the world must conform to, or become the same as, the desire if it is to be satisfied).

satisfaction is intravirtual—and the satisfaction of the desire depends on whether the state of affairs in the virtual world comes to fit his desires. If, however, the man desires a virtual relationship with someone who is a woman in the actual world, then the condition of satisfaction is extravirtual—and the satisfaction of the desire depends on whether or not the state of affairs in the actual world comes to fit his belief. Notice furthermore that whether or not the steps he takes towards satisfying his desires are rational or not will be determined by where the condition of satisfaction lies. This becomes more complex when the extravirtual and the intravirtual become contradictory—and even more so when dealing with emotionally laden activities, as relationships and corresponding activities tend to be.

The distinction between intravirtual and extravirtual also becomes problematic when we mistakenly place the conditions of satisfaction intravirtually, not realizing that they are in fact extravirtual, and this is part of what makes judgments regarding culpability in virtual worlds so difficult. For instance, there have been instances of people who have sued various service providers for not making the extravirtual consequences of their actions clear enough, including instances of bankruptcy due to trading what were believed to be virtual stocks—when in fact the “virtual” stocks were as real as it gets. That is, the “virtual” purchases did not only count as the purchase of stocks within the content of a virtual bank (intravirtually), they counted also as the purchase of stocks in the actual world (extravirtually). In this case, it was not the action that was irrational, since the buyer had a desire to buy virtual stocks—and his actions, for all he knew, satisfied this desire *intravirtually*. His belief was irrational, or false, only because he failed to acknowledge that his virtual acts had extravirtual consequences.

The potential conflict between extravirtual and intravirtual conditions of satisfaction points to another peculiar feature of virtual experiences. If we return to the example above, the person seeking a relationship with a virtual woman can wilfully believe that the person behind the avatar is not a man, disregarding any evidence to the contrary, and therefore engage in the perfectly rational and satisfiable desire to have a virtual relationship with a female. Since a desire often has conflicting intravirtual and extravirtual conditions of satisfaction, it is a common strategy among members of virtual worlds to wilfully adopt certain beliefs and avoid evidence to the contrary, precisely in order to make the actions rational *intravirtually*. This is sometimes referred to as willing suspension of disbelief. In Searle’s terminology, we can describe suspension of disbelief more precisely as wilfully placing the conditions of satisfaction for the belief within the virtual world alone. For instance, the belief that one has a relationship with a woman is satisfied (i.e., true) when the intravirtual states of affairs fit the belief, regardless of extravirtual evidence to the contrary.

Although wilfully placing the conditions of satisfaction in the virtual world can be a straightforward way to avoid a conflict between intravirtual and extravirtual conditions, it can also give rise to a number of ethically problematic scenarios. In the infamous case of the first virtual rape (Dibbell 2007), the perpetrator took control over another user's avatar and forced it to commit extreme sexual and violent acts that the user would never have consented to. Some, including the perpetrator, would see the notion of virtual rape as entirely misplaced because, after all, the virtual entities involved had no physical properties, hence little to do with the physical aspects of rape. The *extravirtual* consequences, however, do arguably have something in common with rape, such as feelings of shame, loss of autonomy, and a sense of degradation (Søraker 2010). The bystanders' response to the incident ranged from rage towards the perpetrator to annoyance with the victim, and these responses correspond to the complex web of conflicting conditions of satisfaction. That is, our judgment of the severity of an event depends on whether we (implicitly) judge someone's intention as aiming for intravirtual or extravirtual conditions of satisfaction—for instance, whether we judge the virtual rapist as trying to hurt the avatar or the person controlling the avatar. The intravirtual consequences of the virtual rapist's action consisted in nothing but a public, textual description of the actions that the victim engaged in, all of which were beyond her control.⁵

What is important is that the *extravirtual* effects of these intravirtual changes are largely determined by the user's mental states. In Dibbell's case, the victim "was surprised, to find herself in tears—a real-life [extravirtual] fact that should suffice to prove that the [intravirtual] words' emotional content was no mere fiction. . . . Murderous rage and eyeball-rolling annoyance, was a curious amalgam that *neither the RL [extravirtual] nor the VR [intravirtual] facts alone* can quite account for (Dibbell 2007, 15–16; my inserts in brackets). The important point here is that the victim's reaction was largely determined by how emotionally invested she was in her avatar and in the community. The reason why many will have a hard time understanding her reaction ("it's just a game!") stems from the fact that we all have different mental states towards such phenomena. Someone with a casual relationship to her avatar may just as well have found the incident amusing, and we would probably never have heard the story. This is precisely what makes ethics so difficult online: the "invisible" user behind the nick or avatar that we communicate with comes with a set of mental states that determine the extravirtual effects of the intravirtual state of affairs. With traditional, non-virtual examples of inflicted harm,

⁵ The "virtual rape" took place in a text-based virtual world, and the rapist used a script referred to as a "voodoo doll," which meant that he could control the actions of another user. Making the victim engage in sexually deviant and violent actions against her will is, in short, the reason why it has been referred to as a virtual rape.

we do not need to ask ourselves whether the subject has a casual or intimate relationship with her own body, but in virtual worlds this makes all the difference.

We are now in a position to pinpoint the radical difference between virtual worlds and other kinds of mediating technologies. When you communicate with somebody on the phone, the mediation can create a sense of remoteness and lack of intimacy that allows us to say things we would not say face to face. The same thing can be said about the extravirtual consequences of virtual communication, but then the remoteness of the extravirtual is not the only thing that might affect your behaviour. In virtual worlds, you get not only the remoteness of the extravirtual but also the immediacy of the intravirtual. For instance, you might say things to an avatar you would not say face to face to an actual person, not only due to being pseudonymous and remote from the *extravirtual* person but also due to the appearance and reactions of the *intravirtual* avatar. That is, when interacting with an avatar, you interact with both the avatar (intravirtual) and the person controlling the avatar (extravirtual). The appearance of the avatar might lead you to interact in a particular way (often determined by how you would interact with a similar type of person in the actual world) that could be completely different from how you would interact with the extravirtual person behind the avatar. Thus, the combination of intravirtual and extravirtual gives rise to a unique form of mediation that cannot be found outside virtual worlds. Compare this with the mediation by phone, where it makes little sense to speak of the “intra-phonational” aspect of your phone conversation. Thus, when it comes to virtual worlds, Jean Baudrillard is fundamentally mistaken when claiming that when we communicate through computers “the Other . . . is never really aimed at—crossing the screen evokes the crossing of the mirror” (in *Xerox and Infinity*, quoted in Springer 1991, 313). When communicating with (or through) avatars, we do (and should) often have the extravirtual human being in mind. If we do not, we are likely to forget that our virtual acts are perceived by another person—and that they can cause real and strong emotions in that person. All of this becomes even more complex if we are not certain whether the intravirtual entity that we interact with has an extravirtual counterpart or not, which might happen when a virtual world has no clear demarcation between artificial agents (bots) and human representations.

In normative terms, all of this entails that we often *should* remind ourselves of the extravirtual Other, in order to recognize that our virtual acts have potentially dramatic extravirtual consequences. But the fact that the extravirtual consequences are often veiled entails that it becomes difficult to arrive at any kind of observer-independent normative guidelines—at least not beyond some version of a precautionary principle to the effect that, when in doubt, we should always take *potential* extravirtual consequences into account.

The Consequences for Philosophy

Part of the purpose of the discussion above is to illustrate the uniqueness of certain phenomena on the Internet, and how this uniqueness poses problems for traditional philosophical frameworks. I have argued that Ihde's notion of technology relations cannot readily be applied to virtual worlds, and that even Verbeek's explicit attempt to account for new and emerging technologies in a similar fashion also falls short. This illustrates that one of the challenges posed to philosophy lies in the inapplicability of traditional theories and frameworks.

Furthermore, one of the reasons for this inapplicability is itself a challenge to philosophy, to ethics in particular. For any consequentialist type of ethics, the distinction between intravirtual and extravirtual places an extra burden on our ability to predict consequences, not only pragmatically but intrinsically. That is, the very nature of virtual worlds, and most forms of online communication, leaves us with few if any clues as to what the extravirtual consequences of our actions may be. This phenomenon also makes it difficult to judge virtual acts as morally right or wrong. In the case of the virtual rape, this would have amounted to harmless fun (and we would never have heard the story) if there were no extravirtual consequences—extravirtual consequences that are entirely determined by the subjective attitudes of the "victim." The monstrosity of making a similar claim with regard to actual rape—that its severity depends on the victim's attitude to her body—illustrates the vast difference, and the challenges we face when applying ethical theory to virtual worlds. All of this shows that the Internet, and virtual worlds in particular, require entirely new theoretical frameworks—and it is the task of philosophers to critically examine this uniqueness so that we do justice to these phenomena. To be fair, there have been some such efforts recently, most notably the philosophy and ethics of information as primarily developed by Luciano Floridi (1999, 2011), but there is still much work to be done.

Conclusion

I have argued above, using the post-phenomenological notion of technology relation as a starting point, that the Internet, and virtual worlds in particular, come with a set of unique characteristics that leave our traditional frameworks inapplicable. On a more constructive note, I have also tried to show how we can better understand many of these phenomena by introducing new distinctions and frameworks, such as the importance of being clear about the intravirtual and extravirtual consequences of our actions, and the corresponding placement of conditions of satisfaction. This in itself shows how unique virtual worlds are, and the distinctions I have suggested will I hope illustrate the importance of rethinking traditional philosophical concepts and frameworks.

To further illustrate the challenge for philosophy, I have argued that the distinction between intravirtual and extravirtual gives rise to important consequences for judging actions as rational or irrational, and as morally right or wrong. With virtual worlds, these judgments must necessarily be observer dependent in a manner very different from more ordinary phenomena—and in a manner that causes concern for anyone who wishes to address these problems by means of applying traditional philosophical theories. The cause of this lies in the fact that virtual worlds qua virtual are observer dependent (ontologically subjective), yet they are grounded in (or made possible by) observer-independent states of a physical computer—a physical computer that in turn is capable of producing both intravirtual and extravirtual states of affairs. This is like few if any other phenomena, at least none of comparable impact on our lives, and thus requires us to radically rethink our philosophical concepts and frameworks. One hopes this article has been a step in this direction.

Department of Philosophy
University of Twente
Postbox 21
7500 AE Enschede
The Netherlands
j.h.soraker@utwente.nl

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