

Virtual Worldview

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The notion of “world” is often invoked in connection with computer games and especially MMOs. “World” is a quite overdetermined if not ambiguous word so why bother with the concept at all? Because certain computer games challenge our notion of what an artefact can be. Compared to a film, a song, a toy, a novel, a symphony etc., certain computer games are so big and typically demands attention from us for such incredible amounts of time that an addition to our vocabulary seems called for; in the following I will use “virtual world” to refer to computer games (of both MMO and other varieties) that pressure our vocabulary in this way.

To avoid some of the ontological complexities entailed in asking “What is a virtual world?” we can ask: “What artefact can reasonably and productively be labelled a virtual world?” One must adopt a certain *attitude* to artefacts such as poems and films to encounter them in a successful manner. Attunement to a virtual world, however, has a far-reaching or “immersive” character. In acknowledgement of the far-reaching character of one’s attunement to virtual worlds, we could talk of it in terms of the *worldview* one has to adopt in order for successful engagement with the virtual world to occur. Engaging with *World of Warcraft* entails, e.g., that one accepts if not embraces a Principle of Unlimited Good (Dundes, 1971), i.e., that one is dealing with a virtual world of unlimited resources.

The notion of worldview creates conceptual affinity between virtual worlds proper and other large-scale cultural artefacts, e.g. work of architecture which will be my focus here. Architectural theory’s holistic ambitions stand in marked contrast to the tendency of game studies. As for architectural theory’s holistic tendency, take for example architect and theorist Juhani Pallasmaa: “Towns, buildings, and objects are also metaphysical instruments. [...] the world we build makes us understand and remember who we ourselves are” (Pallasmaa, 2005: 76). And here is the architect and critic Kenneth Frampton, summing up and endorsing his colleague Vittorio Gregotti’s belief that the fundamental aim of architecture is “to establish a man-made cosmos in the face of the chaos of nature” (Frampton, 2007: 346). As a third example, architect and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz holds that “the house constitutes a ‘microcosm’ visualizing the fact that human life takes place between earth and sky” and that architecture should answer “man’s need for orientation and identification [in the world]” (Norberg-Schulz, 2000: 49 and 6).

Game scholars, on the other hand, maintain a firm grip on concrete reality. They would seem to have good reason to in the face of attempts to “colonise” the field of computer games by scholars from other fields, such as literature and film studies, where speculation is traditionally allowed to run rather freely (Aarseth, 2001). In an attempt, then, to rein in speculation but also in a search for features unique to computer games, game scholars turn their attention to that which is under the hood, so to speak. This attention takes many forms. Jesper Juul’s distinguishes between the superficial layer of “fiction” guiding the player’s attention to the “real”, or underlying, “game” consisting of “rules” and open to description in formal terms (Juul, 2005). Ted Friedman widens this kind of attention to

include other “software products”: “Learning and winning (or, in the case of a non-competitive ‘software toy,’ ‘reaching one’s goals at’) a computer game is a process of demystification: one succeeds by discovering how the software is put together” (Friedman, 2006). Friedman does not mean to say the player will actually be able to read code but that his or her attention is focused on a level that in some sense lays under the surface of appearances. The game researcher’s interests, then, are quite similar to how the player is assumed to be dealing with the game: both parties are, assumedly, focused on “the underlying formal structure”, to quote Klevjer’s way of referring to the level Juul labels “rules” and Friedman “software” (Klevjer, 2006: 103).

It makes intuitive sense that some of the joy of engaging with software products, such as computer games, arises from understanding the inner workings of that product. Klevjer puts it this way (talking about computer games specifically): “the player’s mind is able to *tune in* to the workings of the underlying formal structure” (Klevjer, 2006: 103. My emphasis). There is, however, a risk involved in this way of looking at things: the risk of reducing the game to the underlying structure and, consequently, to ignore aspects of gaming which can not be related directly to the underlying structure. What I want to find then, is a way of talking about attunement to virtual worlds that sits somewhere in between the raging holism of certain architects and the reductionist tendency of game studies. This middle way can be found in anthropology, with the concept of *worldview*.

Worldview is quite useful as an analytical tool, as hinted at in the beginning with the mention of the Principle of Unlimited Good. For now, I will bracket the analytical value of the concept and focus on its philosophical implications:

The worldview one adopts in order to engage with a virtual world such as *World of Warcraft* is only a virtual worldview: it is adopted willingly, temporarily and does not have any strong long-term effect on the everyday worldview of the user. This runs parallel to how one can engage with, e.g., modern, postmodern or deconstructivist architecture, adopting a certain worldview for the time being but not really buying into the truth of that worldview. My enjoyment of Bernard Tschumi’s *Parc de la Villette* is, for example, enhanced by some knowledge of deconstructivist theory. I do not, however, have to believe in the deconstructivist worldview in order to have my aesthetic experience boosted, I can willingly adopt deconstructivism as a temporary “virtual worldview”.

Perhaps the capability to shift between various worldviews is the true hallmark of being modern, as suggested by philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. Like Le Corbusier, Sloterdijk denies that modernism has anything to do with revolution.¹ Modernisation is, rather, a process of explication:

The contemporary age does not turn over objects or themes [i.e., there is no revolution. BL] - it turns them out. It unfolds them, it pulls them to the forefront, it lays them out on a plane, it forces them to become manifest (Sloterdijk, 2008: 42).

1. Cf. Le Corbusier famous end words of “Toward an Architecture”: “Architecture or revolution. Revolution can be avoided” (Corbusier, 2008: 307). That is, if architecture can be taken seriously as that overall framework we live in, it can be developed into a modern framework fitting modern times, hence disjunction and revolution can be avoided.

As a consequence of explication, the modern person no longer lives a life “anchored in an implicit background” but has to find a way of “settling in the explicit”, i.e., to make more or less conscious choices about how he or she sees the world and the appropriate ways of handling such as world. “This leads to the age of chosen world images (*Weltbilder*)”, as Sloterdijk concludes (Sloterdijk, 2008: 44).

All for the better, some would say. In media scholarship, games in general and computer games in particular have been hailed for their potential to enhance young people’s flexibility when it comes to choosing between worldview. This has been stated most clearly by Gee who was introduced earlier with his concept of the affinity group. Each affinity group is associated with a certain *semiotic domain*: “By a semiotic domain I mean any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meanings” (Gee, 2003: 18).

It is emblematic of “modern” life, argues Gee, to master several such additional domains (hence be a potential member of an affinity group based in that domain). As suggested by Gee’s examples of semiotic domain, the premodern person probably master a rather low number of domains compared to a modern person: “Here are some examples of semiotic domains: cellular biology, postmodern literary criticism, first-person-shooter video games, high-fashion advertisements, Roman Catholic theology [etc.]”. (Gee, 2003: 18). If one does *not* master a high number of extra domains but merely the *lifeworld domain* associated with daily life, one is indeed, argues Gee, “trapped in [one’s] own culture” Gee, 2003: 39). Being an expert user of computer games widens the young person’s number of available semiotic domains and hence affinity groups (if only parents would understand that switching between domains is essential to modern life and not discourage the young person from joining associated affinity groups).

A similar sentiment, but without the attack on premodern life, underlies David Williamson Shaffer’s concept, *epistemic frame*, i.e., “collections of skills, knowledge, identities, values, and epistemology”. An epistemic fame can be embedded in games and tried on A student can, e.g., try on the epistemic frame of a historian by playing the role of a historian in a game designed for this specific, educational purpose, or the epistemic frame of a negotiator by trying that role on in a negotiation game (Shaffer, 2006: 29 and 117). The epistemic frame changes how a person looks at and thinks about the world. “The point is”, importantly, “not to train young people to *be* professionals, but to train them to be the kind of people who can *think* like professionals when they want and need to” (Shaffer, 2006: 165).

Flexibility, adaptability, and choice seems to be keywords when it comes to modern worldviews. But celebration of the virtual world’s potential for training the user’s worldview flexibility does not make the virtual world immune to criticism on ground of the concrete worldview it lets the user adopt for a limited period of time. This could be an area of game criticism. Is it, for example, unthinkable that it has some kind of effect on a user to be attuned to a world of unlimited resources for an extended period of time (embracing that Principle of Unlimited Good I have alluded to a couple of times)? Would we not rather have our children play in worlds of limited resources, learning to share resources or face the consequences of not sharing them?

References

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