The Phenomenology of Real and Virtual Places

This collection of essays explores the history, implications, and usefulness of phenomenology for the study of real and virtual places. While the influence of phenomenology on architecture and urban design has been widely acknowledged, its effect on the design of virtual places and environments has yet to be exposed to critical reflection. These essays from philosophers, cultural geographers, designers, architects, and archaeologists advance the connection between phenomenology and the study of place. The book features historical interpretations on this topic, as well as context-specific and place-centric applications that will appeal to a wide range of scholars across disciplinary boundaries. The ultimate aim of this book is to provide more helpful and precise definitions of phenomenology that shed light on its growth as a philosophical framework and on its development in other disciplines concerned with the experience of place.

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The Phenomenology of Real and Virtual Places

Edited by
Erik Champion

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Foreword

The Place of Phenomenology and the Phenomenology of Place

Jeff Malpas

Can there be any inquiry into place that is not phenomenological? Can there be any inquiry, and especially any phenomenological inquiry, that does not involve place? Whatever else phenomenology may be, it is surely, at the very least, a form of inquiry into appearance and the apparent – into *phenomena* and the *phenomenal.* That inquiry may be descriptive or it may be analytical; it may concern itself with what appears or with that which enables appearance, and yet in that very concern with appearance – with the *phenomena* – phenomenology is already and unavoidably concerned with place, since every appearance is, by its very nature, contextual, situated, and placed. Phenomenology is thus always concerned, even if sometimes only implicitly, with place. But if any and every appearance is placed, so too is every inquiry also itself *placed*. In the case of phenomenology, which is in part characterized by a concern with its own conditions of possibility, the concern with place is a concern both with the place of appearance and with the place of its own appearance. In the language I have used elsewhere, phenomenology always takes the form, whether explicitly recognized or not, of a *topology* or *topography.*

The close relation of appearance and place, and so of place to phenomenology, is a particularly important feature of the 20th century phenomenological tradition that develops from Husserl and that encompasses Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty among others. Husserl may not take place as an explicit theme (though he does address space at some length), but many of his own key concepts – most notably the concept of horizon – clearly have connections back to the notion of place. One might even argue that the development of phenomenology after Husserl is in part characterized by the gradual uncovering and explication of the place of phenomenology as well as of the phenomenology of place.

Even outside of the conventional European phenomenological tradition, in the thought for instance of the Japanese Kyoto School, and especially in Nishida, the connection between appearance and place and the placed character of thought is evident once again. As soon as we turn our attention to the phenomena – to the reality of what appears or comes to presence – then we are also drawn to attend, even if sometimes

indirectly, to the way that appearance takes place and is held in place (and here we see the way place properly encompasses time as well as space).

It should not be surprising to discover that phenomenology has played a central role in the development of place-oriented thinking over the last fifty years or so – a period that has indeed seen place become an increasing focus for scholarly attention. Even within geography, a discipline that has its own important tradition of thinking about place in the work of thinkers such as Ratzel and Vidal de la Blanche, phenomenology nevertheless played a crucial role in the turn towards place that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s in the work of such as Tuan, Buttimer, Relph, Samuels, and others. Phenomenology was not alone in its influence here – psychological and ecological ideas were also at work – but it is hard to envisage the turn towards place in humanistic geographic circles without phenomenology. The same is true elsewhere – in architecture for instance, ideas concerning the importance of place have been largely driven through the appropriation into architectural thinking of ideas from phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and also Bachelard. Even environmental thinking, which might otherwise be thought to have exercised its own influence in the turn towards place, has been strongly influenced by the place-oriented thinking of phenomenologists, notwithstanding its frequent mediation through the work of others.

Perhaps we become phenomenologists in the very turn towards place, in the move to take place as a focus for our attention. In that case, to be a thinker of place is necessarily to be a phenomenologist, just as to be a phenomenologist is to be a thinker of place.

The essays gathered together here provide powerful testament to the closeness of the connection between place and phenomenology – and they do so in extremely diverse ways from discussions of video games, cryptocurrencies, and social media to analyses of architecture, painting, and landscape. Yet, these essays also demonstrate the way in which the phenomenological attentiveness to place not only remains central to reflection on human life and activity but also turns out to have a crucial part to play in the investigation of some of the most important new developments in the contemporary world – especially developments around technology, media, and communications. It is often assumed that what is most characteristic about contemporary technologies is that they operate to free us from the constraints of place.

The mobile phone, the Internet, mechanized transportation, and virtual reality systems are all readily understood as enabling us to act in ways that give us control over space and time in new ways, that break down the barriers between places, that enable the equal accessibility to us of all places irrespective of our bodily location (rendering even bodily location ambiguous). Yet although there can be no doubt that

technology changes the way places appear, the fundamental role played by place in the very possibility of appearance, including the appearance even of technology, remains unchanged. It is this that seems to be very clearly demonstrated in the essays here – and the point brings us right back to the way place and phenomenology are themselves so closely related through the way both connect to appearance.

It is the placed character of appearance and phenomenology's own concern with such appearance that must underpin any inquiry that aims to bring place and phenomenology together. It is still a question, however, as to exactly how place and phenomenology are to be understood in any more developed sense within such an inquiry. The question, as to the nature of phenomenology and the various forms in which phenomenology may itself appear, recurs throughout many of the essays contained here. In many respects, this is the primary question on which almost all of these essays converge. The question can be given more precision by saying that what is at issue is the following: how is phenomenology to be understood once it is explicitly situated in relation to place?

This is a not a question that seems to me to have been given sufficient attention in the literature so far, and even this volume represents only a starting point for a more adequate inquiry. The question goes beyond any exploration merely of the methodological usefulness of phenomenology for certain forms of empirical inquiry, or as a framework to enable inquiry within certain fields, or with respect to certain objects – it is the very character of phenomenology that is at issue.

To some extent this question connects with a deep uncertainty that has arisen within contemporary phenomenology: on the one hand phenomenology originates as an inquiry that looks to investigate appearance as it occurs in experience (one might add: in subjective experience, except that such a characterization immediately raises questions as to what "subjective" really means here), and yet on the other, phenomenology is also increasingly drawn towards a conception of itself as "naturalistic," and even "scientific." This uncertainty is not itself directly thematized here, at least not in any especially salient way, but it does sit in the background of those approaches that look to connect phenomenology with cognitive scientific approaches or to combine phenomenology with certain forms of technical inquiry.

If we do take the phenomenological connection to place seriously, and we also attend to what place itself might be (the latter question being seldom directly addressed – even in this volume), then phenomenology will always stand somewhat apart from any purely "naturalistic" inquiry, if by this is indeed meant a form of inquiry that models itself on the natural sciences and its modes of explanation. The concern with appearance is a concern that cannot be captured within the frame of any straightforwardly empirical inquiry nor within the bounds of any particular natural scientific discipline (which does not mean that the inquiry into

appearance does not connect with such inquiries or disciplines but only that it is not restricted to them nor exhausted by them).

I would be inclined to say that this reflects the properly "transcendental" character of phenomenology (there is a further connection here between the transcendental and the topological or topographic), except that the notion of the transcendental is nowadays so little understood and so often misused. Moreover, even putting questions of its "scientific" character aside, phenomenology will always remain irreducible to any set of methods or principles of the sort that can then be "applied" in any straightforward fashion. There is no "method" or no set of "principles" that completely determines the proper manner in which place (or appearance either for that matter) is to be inquired into. Taking place seriously means taking seriously the placed character of any and every inquiry and recognizing that different inquiries will look to place in different ways and with different aims and interests.

This will also apply to phenomenology, and it is one of the reasons why phenomenology has developed in so many different forms (including what Ihde refers to in his chapter as "postphenomenology"), and with so many different "applications" – phenomenology operates, one might say, in many different places. Still, in saying this, one must not lose sight of the fact that these different places, and these different modes of phenomenology, all reside within the more encompassing structure of place as such and with respect to a conception of phenomenology that can itself be located, even if not uncontentiously, in relation to that structure. The difficult task is to hold both ends of what is at issue here together – to keep hold of place and phenomenology as they appear in their multiplicity and their unity.

If place and appearance are tied together, so that every appearance is placed (something affirmed by Aristotle no less than Nishida), then the inquiry into place, and so also phenomenological inquiry, must be counted as the most fundamental form of any inquiry – the mode of inquiry that underpins all else (here its genuinely transcendental character does indeed become evident). This is why the inquiry into place, and so also phenomenology, has a continuing importance that is all the stronger precisely because of the uncertainties that seem to surround place in the contemporary world. It is not only the uncertainties of place created by technology that are relevant here, but the uncertainties that come from the displacement of individuals and populations, the disruption of environmental systems, the destabilization of identities and communities, and the loss even of any sense of the place that might belong to human beings in a world that also encompasses what goes beyond the human. What this suggests, moreover, is that the issues at stake in relation to place, and that must also be addressed by phenomenology, are not only those concerning the way place is configured in different domains and with respect to different modes of appearance or experience, but also

those issues that relate to place in the sense of ethos – place as that which is the basis for ethics.

To invoke this sense of place is not, contrary to some commonly held assumptions, to invoke a reactionary or conservative sense of ethics, or reactionary and conservative politics along with it. It is rather to recognize that ethics too is shaped by the relation of appearance to place and especially by the relation between appearance, place, and commonality. If ethics essentially concerns the relation to others, as well as to oneself and the world, then ethics can only arise in that common place in which relationality is first possible.

Ethics has its origins in place. Although one might say that the issue of the relation between place and ethics receives little in the way of explicit attention in the pages that follow, it is never far from the surface of the discussion – questions of value and identity, of responsiveness and responsibility, and of involvement and implication run throughout these essays. If one cannot think phenomenology or appearance without place, one also cannot properly think place without ethics – to be in place is already to be oriented in ways that give order and significance to what is around us, that set orders of responsibility and obligation, and that shape our sense of who and what we are. Just as this book concerns itself with place, then so too does it concern itself, whether explicitly or not, with the very ethos, in its many forms, in which our lives are shaped.

Preface

If One Is Truly to Succeed in Leading a Person to a Specific Place, One Must First and Foremost Take Care to Find Him Where He is and Begin There.

—Kierkegaard, Søren. (1998). *The point of view*. Princeton, New Jersey, USA: Princeton University Press, p. 45

There is so much one can write about phenomenology, real places and virtual places, and as the interests of you the reader is an enigma wrapped in a mystery to us the writers, it can be hard to know where to start. The Finnish architect Alvar Aalto apparently observed "it is easier to build a grand opera or a city center than to build a personal house," but it is also no easy task to compile chapters examining the phenomenology of real and virtual places.

Given the many backgrounds and disciplines possible in collecting chapters from a variety of real and virtual place-related disciplines, and the various configurations with which these points of view could be ordered, I invite you to make your own way through these chapters. My primary editorial aim was to show how the phenomenology of real places can and cannot be easily modified to also examine how virtual places can be experienced. The journey is ambitious and only preliminary but well worth undertaking.

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Introduction

Why produce yet another edited volume on phenomenology, let alone on phenomenology and virtual place? There are excellent works available on modern phenomenology (Casey Edward 1984, 1998, Casey 1993, 1996); postphenomenology (Ihde 2009, 2010,; Selinger 2012), philosophers of place (Malpas 1999, 2008, 2014), phenomenology of place (Seamon and Mugerauer 1985; Feld and Basso 1996; Coyne 2010; Donohoe 2017), placelessness (Relph 1976), and phenomenology of architecture (Pallasmaa 1996; Norberg-Schultz 1980; Bachelard 1994; Malpas 1999; Seamon 2000; Locke and McCann 2016).

However, there are few if any large-scale focused publications on the phenomenology of virtual place (notable execptions include Kinsley 2014; Seamon 2014; Ritzhaupt et al. 2016). There are still large gaps in the understanding and application of virtual place design and theory amongst related disciplines, such as architecture, geography, planning, anthropology, and archaeology. The most immediate sign of academic panic is the speed with which terms are formed, distorted, and thrown around. For example, augmented reality is used to cover objects appearing in your phone over the camera view without any attempt to spatially locate them in relation to the real world. Panoramas are labelled virtual reality by designers, and even Microsoft calls their augmented reality headset a HoloLens (it does not actually allow you to view holograms).

And the term "computer game" or "video game" covers many contentious issues, is there an essence to (digital) game studies that distinguishes it from other activities? Must a game involve the prospect of winning, or a magic circle (the conceptual space of game play within which normal reality is suspended for the rules, goals and reality of the game)? When is a digital simulation a game?

Perhaps we could turn to the philosophers for more precise and useful terms and concepts. Yet worryingly, there are still philosophers who talk of virtual reality as being in essence a capture, simulation, and abstraction of the real-world around us, and some confuse what they believe is available now in virtual reality with what can and will be available in the future. Many of the writers in this book may also differ

on their interpretations of virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality, and computer games, but I will offer these definitions as a starting point.

First, virtual reality. Historians may debate the first use of the term, the first concept of virtual reality as being provided by (digital) computers or the first working virtual reality device. Naming the first virtual reality device is perhaps the easiest task. Unless one counts the 1939 patent of the View-master as a form of virtual reality (which was in turn inspired by the 1838 invention of the stereoscope), one could argue that the first virtual reality device was probably in the 1960s.

One could provide either the example of Morton Heilig's 1957 (1962 patented) Sensorama Simulator, which allowed people to view mostly passive 3D films (Brockwell 2016) or the 1967/1968 augmented reality invention by Ivan Sutherland nicknamed "Sword of Damocles," a head-mounted display so heavy it had to be mounted from the ceiling (Lowood 2015; Anon 2018). These machines not only existed and worked; you can buy one today. You too could be the proud owner of the 1962 version of the Sensorama Machine (see www.mortonheilig.com/).

However, these devices provided an experience that was not, as far as I know, *called* virtual reality. Although it was used much earlier in French theatre as an explicitly computational term, "virtual reality" has been attributed to computer scientist Jaron Lanier in 1987 (Virtual Reality Services n.d.), but even today, thirty years later, definitions vary.

John Steuer (1992) noted that popular media has tended to base virtual reality around notions of technology rather than experience. Many dictionary definitions are also based on technology rather than a specific experience, although they often include the unclear criterion that virtual reality needs to seem "real." For example, the online Oxford English Dictionary (English Oxford Living Dictionaries n.d.) defines virtual reality as:

> The computer-generated simulation of a three-dimensional image or environment that can be interacted with in a seemingly real or physical way by a person using special electronic equipment, such as a helmet with a screen inside or gloves fitted with sensors.

In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Henry Lowood defined virtual reality as (Lowood 2015):

> … the use of computer modeling and simulation that enables a person to interact with an artificial three-dimensional (3-D) visual or other sensory environment. VR applications immerse the user in a computer-generated environment that simulates reality through the use of interactive devices, which send and receive information and are worn as goggles, headsets, gloves, or body suits.

However, *The Online Cambridge Dictionary* differs from the above (Cambridge Dictonary n.d.): "[virtual reality is] … A set of images and sounds, produced by a computer, that seem to represent a place or a situation that a person can take part in."

The Merriam-Webster (n.d.) differs as well:

> …an artificial environment which is experienced through sensory stimuli (such as sights and sounds) provided by a computer and in which one's actions partially determine what happens in the environment; also: the technology used to create or access a virtual reality.

If we were to summarize the above definitions, they are vision-based but don't clearly state that for a full VR experience, the participant's head should be fully tracked (and the digital environment should respond believably to the participant's moving of their head). For example, while 360-degree video is often confused with full VR, the field of view does not change with the head position and orientation of a person; it is not virtual reality (Smith 2015; Goldman and Falcone 2016).

In telepresence research (https://ispr.info/), there is much debate over immersivity and presence and which of the two is observed of the participant or believed/understood by the participant. Many computer scientists would argue that virtual reality requires head-tracking along with a digital simulation of some form of three-dimensional environment that surrounds the participant, and appears to be, and preferably is, interactive (for more information and a more demanding definition, see Jackson (2015)). The definition implies two conditions: a digitally simulated "reality" or environment that changes in relation to changes in the participant's location and orientation or the participant believes or acts as if the digital simulation is their primary environment.

The provision of precise, quick and stable head-tracking equipment is not always sufficient for many people. Head-tracking the dynamic (free) viewpoint of a human in a three-dimensional digitally projected or displayed space does not necessitate that the human participant believes or acts in that "virtual reality". A comprehensive definition should be based on both technology and beliefs (or observable actions and reactions), in other words, the technology and the *subjective experience* of being immersed in a digital environment.

Augmented reality is a little harder to define in practice. I suggest that augmented reality calculates real-world data to superimpose a digital simulation onto a camera-screen or see-through display showing the real-world, provides non-visual data to the participant based on one's view or position in relation to the real world. Unfortunately, many phone applications say they provide augmented reality when they merely retrieve the user's latitude and longitude and let a digital object or text

hover very approximately over a spot on the viewfinder of the phone's camera. I'd prefer to call that type of rough and ready proto-augmented reality a layered or collaged reality.

An exacting 3D-calibrated definition of the term "augmented" as "augmented" implies the digitally generated additional content not only supplements (Azuma 2004) but also improves the real-world. Further, many earlier uses and descriptions of augmented reality in projects and publications assumed augmented reality has to be vision-based (I suggest non-sighted people also experience reality).

Thirdly, augmented reality (AR) implies the main content is real, and the digital is a smaller if important addition to the underlying reality, but the digital content mixed with the real-world content could actually create an experience of a totally different reality, world, or place. I personally prefer the term mixed reality (MR) although MR has traditionally been defined more vaguely as "the merging of real and virtual worlds somewhere along the "virtuality continuum" which connects completely real environments to completely virtual ones"; in other words mixed reality is a digitally-provided experience somewhere between augmented reality and virtual reality (Milgram and Kishino 1994).

Given these working definitions of virtual reality, augmented reality, and mixed reality, can we agree on the usefulness of virtual reality to provide an experience of place? I am afraid not. Just as I finished revising this introduction, I came across an online article by Professor of Philosophy, Janna Thompson (2018). The title of Thompson's article is "Why virtual reality cannot match the real thing." While I agree that a real-world travel experience is difficult to simulate let alone be equaled by virtual reality technology, the whole article only considers the point of view of virtual reality as attempting to provide accurate and equivalent realistic interactive simulations of the existing real world; she even talks of "real experiences."

Should virtual reality only attempt to parasitically emulate that which we can already directly experience (given mobility, money, and initiative)? For example, Sir David Attenborough (Hamilton 2018) sees the potential of the Natural History Museum's "Hold the World" VR application to allow people to not be "separated from it [a fragile museum object] by glass… You want to be able to look at it and see the back of it and turn it around and so on."

Virtual reality does not only have to copy what is there; it can allow people to reconfigure, view underlying hypotheses and processes, or mix and match contested views or clashing interpretations. Virtual reality (and augmented reality) can show you, on site or remotely, what you would not have seen, contested, inferred, amalgamated, or extrapolated from a more locally-situated or past point of view. This potential inspired my last twenty years of research, and it has led me to ask thirteen other academics to explore whether phenomenology can be successfully

moved from describing and understanding our experiences in the world around us to the virtual places (and virtual worlds) that may be created in the near future.

While *Phenomenology of Real and Virtual Places* focuses more on VR than on AR or MR, many challenges and opportunities are relevant to all three. Given the wide range of author backgrounds and it being the early days of consumer-accessible AR and VR, I propose considering the phenomenology of virtual places to be facing (at least) five major issues:

Firstly: how does or could our experience of landscape and geophysical space carry over to the exploration of virtual and otherwise digitally mediated places? Places are built, formed, shaped, or just appear. Landscapes are too seldom mentioned in a discussion of virtual place; they are everywhere and hidden. In Chapter 1, well-known geographer Edward Relph borrows from Heidegger to describe landscapes as suffering from "inconspicuous familiarity," because we believe we already know their meanings and purposes without having to reflect on them.

In contrast, archaeologist and archaeogaming scholar Andrew Reinhard approaches landscape from an archaeological point of view, but his discussion of landscape is the landscape setting and journey in the computer game (and now VR game) *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* and *Skyrim as* surveyed by an archaeologist. Computer games have evolved from single game levels to sandboxes (providing freedom to roam or in cases to change the game world) to expanding universes (such as *No Man's Sky*). Ethnography and phenomenology are two approaches that may be in need of appropriate recalibration.

Media scholar Leighton Evans approaches phenomenology from the point of view of locative media research. How can phenomenological approaches and methods be applied to locative media studies? Evans' case study was *Foursquare*, a location-based service that builds a database of places by users who create and check in at "spots," and he considers the vexing conundrum of how to measure individuals' experiences of place and the use of qualitative data.

The onwards march of technology encounters a second issue with phenomenology, its age. Has phenomenology as a discipline (or even as an approach) maintained its relevance in terms of changes in scientific knowledge and advances in technology? Don Ihde is famous in philosophical circles for his development of the concept *postphenomenology*, (for Ihde a hybrid phenomenology, combining aspects of philosophy of technology and pragmatism). His chapter raises important but difficult questions, such as whether traditional phenomenology can address the multistable requirements of possible places.

Another philosopher, Bruce Janz, investigates place by considering the implications of virtuality [for example, via *The Oxford Handbook of Virtuality* (Grimshaw 2014)] which leads him to consider place as

more of a spontaneous event than as a static, neutral stage. Janz proposes, "We construct representations of worlds, but we do not construct worlds."

But how could or should we apply a phenomenological approach to modern digital ways of reorganizing the real-world? Architect and philosopher Richard Coyne raises an economic and technical issue not foreseen a decade ago: the world of the bitcoin and the blockchain world and how these new forms of currency exchange can influence or even help create virtual environments, via commerce in virtual places. His chapter examines key concepts about commercial transactions in virtual places and platforms such as Decentraland ("Decentraland is a virtual reality platform powered by the Ethereum blockchain," https://decentraland. org, accessed 23.02.2018).

If phenomenology could be viewed as a discipline, a distinct field of research, it would not only be challenged by the passing of time and the whims of intellectual fashion but also by distance. If phenomenology is a fundamental approach to life as experience, to understand others we should also study how they view the experience of place. John Krummel provides us with one such perspective, make that two: Kyoto School philosophies of place via an investigation of the writings and observations of Nishida Kitarō and his "grand-student" Ueda Shizuteru. Krummel focuses in particular on their concepts of place and implacement; he then places their thinking in relation to the phenomenon of globalization. Krummel also notes the interactions and influences between these two important philosophers of place in Japan with an important philosopher of place in Germany, Martin Heidegger.

Professor of Civilization Studies and Philosophy, Nader El-Bizri (who is also an architect), approaches the concept of place directly from a close reading of Heidegger and the notion of unfolding and Dasein's being-in-the-world. How can we apply Heidegger's thoughts to new forms of digital place-making and new forms of embodiment that may soon be available, say via sensory-enhanced cybernetics?

A fourth question is the matter of place-making, dwelling, and inhabitation. We dwell in places, and sometimes we speak of genius loci, a spirit of place. Does this carry over to a phenomenology of virtual places? The phenomenology of architecture, by contrast, might seem to be a straightforward development of Heidegger's thinking applied to the design and appreciation of architecture and place-making in the real-world and then applied to the design of virtual places.

I disagree; in my chapter, I critique the relationship of place and phenomenology in the writings of Norberg-Schulz. Issues in Norberg-Schulz's theory of dwelling and meaningful architecture include romantic notions of regional identity and aesthetic unity, architectural form as essence, and a startling omission of people *in place* and variations in cultural worldviews. I propose instead to look at how culture is constructed,

preserved, and disseminated, and how the wear, tear, and care of physical places along with an understanding of human embodiment and mortality may actually help improve the user experience of virtual environments and virtual worlds.

Philosopher Tobias Holischka approaches dwelling and a sense of place not from architectural history but from within Minecraft, and in light of the thoughts of Heidegger, in particular those found in his essay *Bauen, Wohnen, Denken (*Building Dwelling Thinking). Holischka's primary aim is to point out parallels between Heidegger's essay and *Minecraft*. We may question whether one can genuinely build, dwell, and think in the low-resolution and rather clunky if charming graphical user interface of *Minecraft*. However, looks can be deceiving. In 2014 Microsoft bought *Minecraft* for 2.5 billion US dollars (Gilbert 2014). In 2015 *Minecraft* became the second highest selling game of all time, after *Tetris* (Peckham 2016).

From a philosophical point of view, we may still question whether *Minecraft* preset tools are designed to be so user-friendly and immediate that we don't spend time to think and therefore dwell *through building.* Tarrying (or being distracted by "marginal practices") is usually resisted by the gameplay of games, survival mode, etc.; they try to hurry the player along, and yes *Minecraft* allows you to dawdle, but dawdle in order to linger over and reflect on what, exactly? Balancing constant engagement against an aptitude and space (or place) to learn is a problem for educational games that attempt to create and inspire reflection.

Even apparently simple virtual environments such as *Minecraft* may lead to insights into human behaviors and attitudes. Insights by philosophers have recently been supported by research into how we perceive virtual environments. For example, Martin Heidegger wrote about a 'thingly character' to works of art (including paintings and buildings), which is not encompassed or created by the perception of mere stimuli; we don't typically hear noise, yet we hear sounds. Heidegger's argument has been recently bolstered by experiments in virtual environments. Researchers have suggested that there is indeed a 'toolness' quality to certain objects in virtual environments. We may further extend the argument to suggest there is an aspect of 'thingness' to our perception of our world that should be considered when we design virtual environments:

> Objects that we associate with grasping – things such as cups, utensils, cell phones, and so on – appear to have a special hold on our visual attention.

> (Handy and Tipper 2007, 941)

Virtual place design has not yet fully explored the distinction between ready-to-hand (a useful tool) and present-at-hand (such as an object

lying on a table), but it also must catch up to the mediation of virtuality through tethered and untethered head mounted displays (HMDs). Or does it really need to? The ubiquity of digital technology has coerced us into conflating data with digital data (data was not always digital), and digital with virtual (when in fact virtual is from the Latin and in its current usage preceded the digital, unless by digital you are referring to fingers and toes).[1]

While places are obviously made up of architecture and landscape, mediated by technology (Borgmann 2012), and are experienced within the framework of quite different worldviews, our experience of place is also more intimately social: personal, familial and communal, yet also sometimes foreign and menacing. Chapters in the fifth theme of this collection of essays examines these other aspects of place. Patricia Locke, co-editor of *Merleau-Ponty: Space, Place, Architecture* (Locke and McCann 2016) explains how painting can be viewed as a portal to reality, a form of virtual reality interface, and how new technology such as *Google Tilt Brush* (www.tiltbrush.com/) and *WebVR* examples such as *A-frame* (https://aframe.io/) hold out the promise of individual and collaborative artistic possibilities (these applications allow you to paint in space, walk around your painting, and export it to a 3D modeling program). However, Locke considers phenomenology by applying Merleau-Ponty theory to Locke experiencing Paul Cézanne's watercolors, which were painted at Château Noir outside Aix-en-Provence, France. Can we apply the experience of the effect of painting as seeing? Is painting a form of freeze-game? Can it suspend time and split open space?

Susan Bredlau explains more personal and interpersonal aspects of place from an approach influenced by Merleau-Ponty, treating the lived body itself as place, and she then expands on the intersubjective quality of many human places. These landscapes are "places as loci of intimacy and particularity," and Bredlau notes that the collective nature of place can extend to the virtual.

Sometimes interpersonal and communal forces are forced, necessary or unpleasant. Neil Vallelly asks, how can phenomenology be "adopted to address the issue of forced displacement?" He suggests that eventually we will have to address the mental condition of refugees and their traumatic relation to place via their own condition of embodiment and he concludes with three powerful questions:

> How do we recover the lived bodies of refugees and displaced persons? How do we return them to themselves? And how might phenomenology be useful in this endeavor?

Unpleasant encounters can also take place in video games. Archaeologist and media scholar Florence Smith Nicholls' chapter explores how

a phenomenology of virtual space and place could be applied to dark tourism. Her case study is a non-fictional asylum recreated in the Italian game: *The Town of Light.*

Erik Champion, 1 June 2018

Note

1 For more historical background, please consider reading https://www.fi.edu/virtual-reality/history-of-virtual-reality (accessed 23 February, 2018) or http://public.oed.com/aspects-of-english/word-stories/digital/ (accessed 23 February, 2018).

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