

Is the Virtual Real?

Week 9, Unit 3 Knowledge, Reality and VR

PHI3VRP Virtual Reality as Philosophy

Introduction

- What I'm covering in the video lectures this week:
- 1. Introducing the Realism versus Irrealism (Fictionalism) Debate
- 2. Interview with Prof. David Chalmers (Realist)
- 3. Interview with Dr. Neil McDonnell and Dr. Nathan Wildman (Irrealists/Fictionalists)

Introducing the Realism versus Irrealism Debate

Week 9: Video Lecture 1

PHI3VRP Virtual Reality as Philosophy

Realism vs. Irrealism

Realism:

- 1. Virtual objects really exist.
- 2. Events in virtual reality really take place.
- 3. Experiences in virtual reality are non-illusory.
- 4. Virtual experiences are as valuable as non-virtual experiences.

Irrealism:

- 1. Virtual objects do not really exist.
- 2. Events in virtual reality do not really take place.
- 3. Experiences in virtual reality are illusory.
- 4. Virtual experiences are less valuable than non-virtual experiences.

Fictionalism

Irrealists are usually fictionailists

Fictionalism:

- (1) Virtual objects are fictional objects.
- (2) Virtual events take place only in fictional worlds.
- (3) Experiences in virtual reality involve illusory perception of a fictional world.
- (4) Virtual experiences have the limited sort of value that engagement with fiction has.



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“Suppose I enter the virtual environment of *Second Life* in order to have a conversation with a friend. In what sense is what goes on fictional? I am really having a conversation with my friend: this is not fictional at all. Presumably if there is a fiction here, it involves our avatars. For example, perhaps the virtual world depicts us as having certain bodies that we do not really have, and depicts our bodies as being a few meters apart when in fact we are thousands of miles apart.

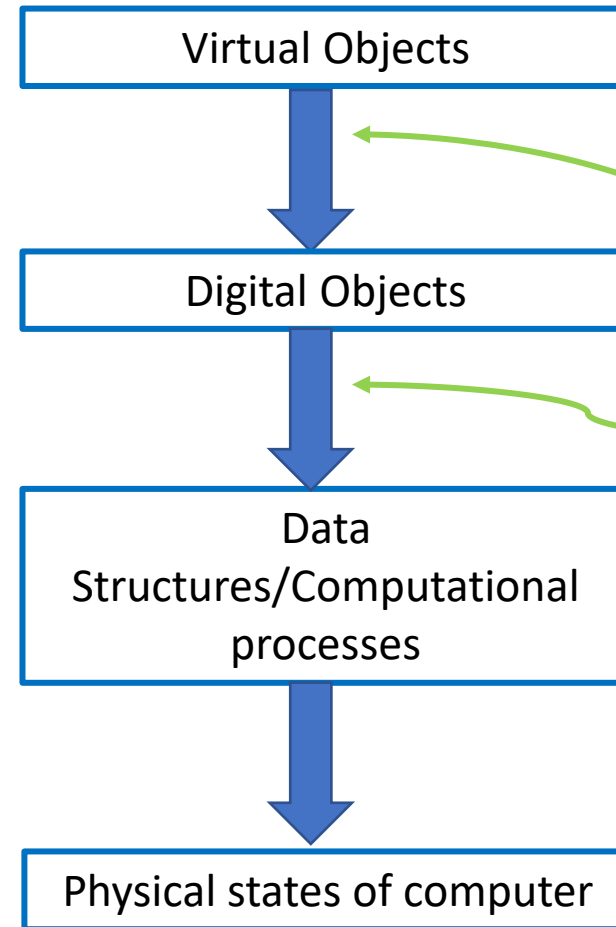
I think this is the wrong way to think about *Second Life* and other virtual worlds. The right way is this. The virtual world of *Second Life* involves virtual bodies (avatars) in virtual space. Virtual bodies are distinct from physical bodies, and virtual space is distinct from physical space. We really have these virtual bodies, as well as having physical bodies. There is nothing fictional about this. These virtual bodies really inhabit virtual space, where they are really a few (virtual) meters apart. There is nothing fictional about this. If I pick up a virtual coin in *Second Life*, I really use my virtual body to take possession of a virtual coin.” (Chalmers 2017: 316-317)



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“What are virtual objects? In my view, they are digital objects, constituted by computational processes on a computer. To a first approximation, they can be regarded as data structures, which are grounded in computational processes which are themselves grounded in physical processes on one or more computers. To a second approximation, one may want to invoke more subtle relations between virtual objects and data structures, just as theorists often invoke more subtle relations between high-level nonvirtual objects (e.g. a statue) and underlying physical entities (e.g. a lump of clay). For example, in some cases, multiple data structures will be associated with a single virtual object, in which case the virtual object will be a higher-level entity constituted by these data structures. I will focus on the simple data structure view here, but much of what I say should generalize to more complex views.” (Chalmers 2017: 317)

In his reply piece, Chalmers states that virtual objects and properties are partly grounded in data structures *and* partly grounded in mental objects and properties. But, Chalmers thinks, the same can be said about non-virtual objects and properties.



Could be the identity relation or a weaker relation like the constitution relation (statue and lump of clay). Chalmers is officially neutral on this issue.

“Corresponding to each avatar in *Second Life*, there is a data structure on the *Second Life* servers (perhaps distributed redundantly across many servers). When I see an avatar, it is this data structure that brings about my perception. What I perceive directly reflects the properties of this data structure: the perceived location of the avatar reflects one property of the data structure, while the perceived size, color, and so on reflect other properties. When my avatar interacts with a coin, the two data structures are interacting.

Whenever two virtual objects interact in *Second Life*, there is a corresponding interaction among data structures. Data structures are causally active on real computers in the real world; the virtual world of *Second Life* is largely constituted by causal interaction among these data structures.” (Chalmers 2017: 317)



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The Causal Argument for Realism

(1) Virtual objects have certain causal powers (to affect other virtual objects, to affect users, and so on).

(2) Digital objects really have those causal powers (and nothing else does).

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Therefore, (3) Virtual objects are digital objects.

(Chalmers 2017: 318)

The Perceptual Argument for Realism

- (1) When using virtual reality, we perceive (only) virtual objects.
- (2) The objects we perceive are the causal basis of our perceptual experiences.
- (3) When using virtual reality, the causal bases of our perceptual experiences are digital objects.

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Therefore, (4) Virtual objects are digital objects.

(Chalmers 2017: 318)

The Virtual Theft Argument Against Fictionalism

(1) Only existent things can be stolen.

(2) Virtual objects can be stolen.

Therefore, (3) Virtual objects exist.

“In the end, the court determined that the virtual objects under consideration had demonstrable value to the parties in the case, and therefore had value *simpliciter*. Consequently, in 2012 the Supreme Court of the Netherlands upheld the conviction and dismissed the appeals, declaring that ‘virtual items can be regarded as goods and can therefore be the subjects of such property offences’ (Wolswijk 2012: 460).

As well as being exciting for legal theorists and philosophers of law, this case is directly relevant to on-going debates in metaphysics and aesthetics concerning the ontology of virtual reality. In particular, virtual realists claim that virtual objects are ‘real’ – that is, they genuinely exist – and virtual events genuinely occur. Meanwhile, virtual irrealists hold that virtual objects are not ‘real’ (i.e. they do not exist), and events that take place in virtual reality do not genuinely occur.

The court’s ruling generates a puzzle for irrealists. Put bluntly, how can you steal something that does not exist?” (Wildman and McDonnell 2020: 2)