

Ten *Real* Years of *Virtual* Worlds: 1993-2003

...and the shape of things to come

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A note on the lecture:

This is a transcript (based on memory, in the absence of anyone to tape-record the performance on the day) of a workshop that took place at the beginning of 2003. The improvised presentation involved the use of computer (laptop) aided audio-visual facilities. It was an informal style of presentation to a group made up of students of philosophy, literature, media-studies, and the audio-visual arts, including a few high-achieving individuals (in the sciences and politics) who were given the opportunity to explore areas of study that would otherwise have been considered peripheral to their main field of research.

The presentation was mostly an exercise in extemporization (the videos were not always shown in chronological order) as I endeavoured to create a partial pictorial study – a visual history – of the rapid evolution of cutting-edge technology in the field of visually immersive computer-generated 3D virtual worlds.

The spirit of the session was inspired by my passion for computer games, not just as a player, but also as one fascinated by the phenomenological and technological implications of an evolutionary force that is deconstructing the classic distinctions between the real and the virtual. Pedagogically, it aimed to prepare the students for a group seminar discussion on the philosophical and existential implications of a technological movement toward the limit at which the classic definitions of the real and the virtual begin to break down, i.e., cyberspace.

It demonstrates how the 'meaningful' impact of visual data is largely a matter of imagination – the degree of 'suspension of disbelief' and the 'will to believe' – and that the various forms of sensory data and tactile stimulation in general are not merely synthesized in the imagination, but actually shaped and augmented by its manifold intentionalities. Imagination and worldliness are nothing without a structuralizing horizontal opening onto the world *as anticipation* (a kind of proto-imagination / protention) – as the reaching-out that facilitates 'meaningful-encounter.' Imagination is an *ekstatic* projecting of life *as lived*, as it *was* lived, how it *might have been* lived, how it *might be* lived, how it

could be lived, how it *ought to be* lived, or even how it *ought not to be* lived (which is one of the areas in cyberspatial immersion that is the most fun)...

...Imagination is affective anticipation as a kind of eagerness to process and play with the subtle signs by which a world is suggested, signs that can be so easily fabricated by technology; a technology that is fuelled by a desire to be fooled...

...Audio-Visual suggestion, technological manipulation of the tactile senses, living out our wildest fantasies cybernetically, the high probability one day of being able simply to plug ourselves in...

In this regard, the students were required to see two films, *The Matrix* and *eXistenZ* in preparation for the second part of the workshop. And, in this prelude to the group discussion I played the role of visual DJ while improvising a commentary – a show – that I hoped would inform as well as entertain. I projected video trailers (various .avi files, .mov's, .mpg's, etc.) of pc games that I had tracked down on the internet – some of which were official and some of which had been produced by technologically well-educated fans of the genre – onto a large screen and spoke about their history as moments of an explosion of different possibilities that lie before us as cyber-surfing beings...

...the phenomenological tone was constant throughout.

The Addendum was added much later that year after the E3 Exhibition and the inspirational demo of Valve's *Half-Life II* in development had stolen the show – setting a new standard of excellence that will undoubtedly shape the next decade of what is to come. When I finally got around to working on this transcript in html (with its links to the original game-trailers that were presented on the day), it seemed natural to add the demonstration video of *Half-Life II* as the Big Finale, although, in the real world, it was not actually released until several months after the entire course: 'Philosophy, Fantasy and Film' had been concluded. I also added the demo out of respect and sympathy for the design team at Valve after their system was hacked and vital *Source* code was stolen. Despite the delay, this game will be well worth the wait!