Virtual Kingdoms

The word 'virtual' comes from the Latin '*virtus*', from which we get the word 'virtue'. It is related also to both 'power' and 'masculinity'. '*Virtu*s' has two interrelated meanings. First, it refers to an inherent or embodied capacity, quality or power. Secondly, it refers to what is valued, worthy of merit, a quality of excellence. In the first case, the word has ontological reference; and, in the second, it has moral reference. As I said, these two sets of meanings are interrelated with respect to personal development, or what might be called moral formation. The subject is submitted to disciplinary techniques that hone moral perfections – the virtues; but these virtues (and the number and nature of them is not constant) were not understood as external values into which subjects were socialized so much as inner qualities, inherent powers for behaving worthily, for being virtuous. Engagement in virtual kingdoms then had both ethical and ontological consequences. It also had epistemological and aesthetic consequences. For to practice right forms of behaviour required self-understanding; the practices produced forms of intelligibility about what it was to be good and what it was to be human. Furthermore to act rightly was to act with due proportion, or suitably, to any situation. The act virtuously was to act beautifully.

Such an understanding of the relationship between the virtual (or inherent potential) and virtue (the public realisation of that inherent potential), pertained throughout the ancient world, and Patristic Christianity incorporated much of this thinking into their own philosophical theology, as we shall see. From this is becomes evident that virtual realities are nothing new; they are as old as idealism and utopianism itself. But this raises a number of questions with respect to our contemporary and electronic versions of VR. These are questions not only concerning how they differ from and are similar to their more ancient and traditional forebears. These questions also concern the central feature of engagement with virtual kingdoms – that is, the personal formation their nurture. This paper examines three such kingdoms, with respect to understanding three things about them. First, the techniques they enjoin that fashion the participant's world-view. Secondly, the archaeology of the "fundamental codes of a culture" producing these virtual kingdom. This is, an analysis of what Michel Foucault called the 'epistemes' that sustain the production and belief in the value of such virtual kingdoms: "The fundamental codes of a culture – those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices – establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home."[1] Thirdly, the interrelationship between contemporary VR's and the metaphysical and eschatological kingdoms of Plato, on the one hand, and Christianity, on the other. For no virtual kingdom is constructed *ex nihilo*, and I suggest the present allure of computer generated virtual realities rehearses moments pertaining to metaphysical and theological world-views. This raises a question concerning which moments are rehearsed and why. It is by placing contemporary VRs within the tradition of virtual kingdoms that we can begin to see their distinctiveness; a distinctiveness that is not simply an effect of advanced telecommunication

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[1] *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), p.xx.

technology.

The Republic of the Forms

We begin by descending into Plato's cave, as his story unfolds in Book Seven of *The Republic* and exploring the disciplines of desire that operate between all levels. Three levels of virtual reality are described, but it is the relationship between them that is fundamental, and governs the possibility of movement. The three levels structurally organise the spatial dimensions of the cave itself. The description begins with those bound prisoners facing a screen or the back wall of the cave on which are thrown figures projected from a fire in front of which people pass carrying "figures of men and animals made of wood and stone and all sorts of other materials." They assume "the shadows they saw were the real things." Although the Greek word is not real but *alethes*, true. In fact the word 'real' only comes into the English language from the late Mediaeval use of the word '*realia*' – which is the cultural product of quite a different philosophical and theological world-view.[2] The first virtual situation then is virtual because it is both not true and yet related to what is true. This is philosophically important: the untrue is not without some potential for being true. The untrue is not the opposite or antithesis of the true. The person who is released from their bondage to the screen and forced to turn around is made to understand the connection, because the images on the screen are not self-generating but the product of a higher form of representation of the true. We are told explicitly that "He [i]s turned towards objects that [are] more real [*alethes*, again]." We are informed there is a struggle here in between two representations of the true; a struggle as to which is believed to be more genuine, more real. And this struggle is only resolved by the person being forcibly dragged up the slope of the cave, beyond the fire and into the sunlight. Here in the sunlight he undergoes a training in how to see aright. "First he would find it easiest to look at shadows, next at reflection of men and other objects in water, and later on at the objects themselves." He would come to understand "everything in the visible world" as it is generated by the sun. He would also come to understand how the objects carried before the fire within the cave and the illusions they threw upon the screen behold by the prisoners are both representations made possible on the basis of what the sun makes visible in the world outside the cave. Everything is virtually real, then, everything is virtually true because the sun makes it so. Put metaphysically, the sun is the first principle – the condition for the possibility of all things in the world. All things in the world take their intelligibility and their existence – that is, have degrees of being true – with respect to how close they are or how far they are from the sun.

The released prisoner undergoes a disciplining of perception. This is an educative process in which he moves through levels of virtual reality in order to come to the highest understanding of what is that he is capable of. Only the sun is ultimately real or true, for it is that which is the condition for the possibility of truth: the first principle. But the other levels though trafficking in representations of the true nevertheless participate in the true; the sun remains the condition for their possibility. They are potentially true, have the capacity for being true – bit it is a potential or capacity only actualised in the light of "look[ing] directly at the sun itself, and gaz[ing] at it without using reflections in the water or any other medium." The virtual

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[2] See my *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.156-70.

is virtual only because of this ontological and epistemological participation of the representation in the prototype.

Now let us examine the effects of this participation or ontological correspondence between the graduations of reflections and the condition for the possibility of all things in terms of the formation or the subject, the released prisoner. First, we can note that the subject being formed is immersed in the experience. He is not the passive and detached observer. He undergoes the process of enlightenment, by engaging, struggling, training, resisting, and ascending slowly. His formation is an interactive praxis within a world order that is hierarchically constituted: there is a hierarchy of being (in which some things are more and some things less real than others) and a hierarchy of knowing (in which things are better or less understood than others). The hierarchies of being and knowing are also associated with a moral hierarchy and a political hierarchy – since the Sun is an allegory for the form of the Good and the whole of Plato's treatise is concerned with the definition of and the education in justice. The second observation we can make then is that the formation of the subject through these interactive practices is teleological, progressive, developmental. He is disciplined such that what is virtuous within him is publicly realised. And for Plato that even means this subject, in imitation of the Sun that gives all things, must give himself. He must turned from the contemplation of the sun and descend to the prisoners who our bound within the depths of the cave that he might instruct them. He must then wander between the levels of the virtual, marking out their correspondences through his walking.

We need to move now to a much more complex examination of the cultural codes that so closely associate this pedagogy of human desire with virtual reality. Of course, not all in ancient Greece were follows of Plato. But the advocacy of such a world view accepts and assumes certain social values: the leisure to contemplate and the value (social and personal) of such contemplation. In turn this requires that education, the training of not only the mind but the body, is held in high esteem. The world is ordered by a transcendental principle that can be converted from the True, to the Good, and the Just, and the Beautiful. This order of the world by a transcendental principle lends to the things in the world a certain translucence. Objects are not opaque things in themselves, they are vehicles for transcendental operations; they are bearers of a transcendental watermark. Objects have a certain iconic value. The only have their existence through a participation; a participation that Plato figures in terms of light/illumination. The question is often asked about the philosopher in the cave, what is it that makes him start his journey towards the real. The text simply states: "Suppose one of them was let loose, and suddenly compelled to stand up and turn his head and look and walk." There are several points in the journey when 'compulsion' or force is made evident. We might suppose that the prisoner is set loose by one who, illuminated, has descended back into the cave to enlighten others, but the drive that compels and continues to compel is best understood with reference to *Symposium*: the erotic law of attraction whereby each is drawn to the sun, form of the Good. All things exist then in a participatory dynamic, an erotic dynamic associated with light. There is, of course, a philosophical anthropology assumed here, an account of what is it to be a human being. Virtuality is concerned with degrees of light/knowledge/goodness; it is the necessary condition for *paideia* – training, disciplining, education. Virtuality is the condition for praxis. If the form of the Good were fully realised (without virtuality) then nothing would exist for all things would be absorbed within and be the form; there would be stasis. The condition for teleological movement, for movement at all, is the virtuality of the real, the true, the good, the just, the beautiful. The

virtuality enjoins exercise and so becomes inseparable from formation and becoming. It is in this way that virtue and virtuality are associated. Furthermore, the condition for the possibility of virtuality is transcendental first principle; without that principle what is is not virtual at all. The real or true would then be a plane of immanence, without distinction – something akin to what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a "body without organs": "the body without organs presents its smooth, slippery, opaque, taut surface", it is "undifferentiated fluid", "a non-productive stasis".[3]

The City of God

Having then come to understand something of the nature of Plato's virtual republic and the role virtuality plays in the social and cultural constitutions of such a republic, let us examine a second form of the virtual kingdom: Augustine's city of God. As has been frequently noted and Augustine himself confessed, some Platonic ideas were taken up explicitly and developed in distinctive ways by early Christian theologians like the Cappodocian fathers and the Latin fathers, Ambrose and Augustine. The transcendental schema remains: the Good as the True, the Just, and the Beautiful. The imagery of light and the economy of eros are as fundamental to Augustine as to Plato: "our Final Good is that for which other things are to be desires, while it is itself to be desired for its own sake," Augustine writes.[4] There is then a participation and a movement governed by desire for the Good. But the virtuality is different. In *Confessiones* one might discern a movement from darkness into light similar to the prisoner's journey in the cave. Augustine treats the darkening understanding of a youth foaming with desires, moved this way and that, tossed on a sea of pleasures and pains and how through various degrees of Christian teaching and Greek metaphysics – the Manichees, neoplatonism, the teaching of Ambrose – his mind is gradually illuminated such that, with his mother, he experiences a vision of beatification: "we entered into our own minds. We moved up beyond them so as to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance." The Christian praxis of anagogy, or ascent, has then parallels with the paideia of Plato's philosopher-ruler. But the language of ascent, for Augustine, is not systematised. So that while he distinguishes between the earthly city and the heavenly city and views the Christian as on a pilgrimage towards the heavenly city, he recognizes "this mortal condition of the two cities… which are so mingled together from the beginning to the end of their history." What is different about the modes of virtuality in Plato and Augustine is the role faith plays with respect to perception of the virtuality. "[B]oth cities alike enjoy the good things, or are afflicted with the adversities of this temporal state, but with a different faith, a different expectation, a different love until they are separated by the final judgement, and each receives her own ends." While then there is an order in which things are more or less true, good, just and beautiful depending upon the degree of their submission to God – there is a moral, intellectual and aesthetic hierarchy governed by the convertible transcendentals – it is not human will alone that can attain to the higher realms. Nor will human judgement ever be fully assured which level has been attained. Theoria or Platonic seeing, is a practice in hope and faith. Believing in the hope of its place in Christ precedes and succeeds all knowledge.

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[3] *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, p.9.
[4] *The City of God*, p.843.

It would follow from this that the mode of participation in the virtual kingdoms of Plato and Augustine differs. For Augustine, participation is not by desire (or love) alone. Participation is constituted by a triadic economy of desire, faith and hope (or expectation). The participation is at once erotic, ascetic and eschatological; desire is tempered by the discipline of believing in the invisible in the visible and by a providential movement towards the final goal of salvation, the "Final Good", redemption of the world. That the erotic remains very important for Augustine is evident in the ways the behaviours and visions of these two cities are governed by "two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self." But that "love of God" is a double genitive – both "love for God" and "God's own love". In other words there is a co-activity between God and self in the formation of the Christian person; there is a personalising of the relation between the subject and the transcendental principle – there is the operation of grace.

The virtual nature of the heavenly city issues from its production by grace in the earthly city. Its nature consists in being eschatologically real; that is, while being present as the continuation of the tradition in everyday practices, it is also not fully realised. The Kingdom has yet to come. It is a virtual then because it is only analogically available – through Scriptural witness to such a city whereby earthly civic living can be compared, and through the church as the eucharistic community, the body of Christ. Though Augustine is emphatic that visible attachment to the institution of the church is no guarantee of participation in the heavenly city. And so there is a double virtuality. For the visible cannot be read as the real and the invisible can only be perceived by faith and grace. But only one of these virtualities is true, good, beautiful and just – and the key to Christian theoria, and the disciplining of human desire, is learning to discern in these virtualities that which belongs to the Kingdom of God. This learning and disciplining insofar as it is governed by God's grace and orientated towards God's goodness and beauty, forms a moral character, developed not so much around axioms (though the ten commandments are moral axioms) as virtues fashioned by a vision of Christ as the righteousness one. What is distinctive about this formation, even when it is a certainly about the development of specific individuals (like Augustine himself in *Confessiones*) its technologies (to use a Foucauldian term) are public and social. What is being established in the presence of the heavenly city within the earthly city is true citizenship, true civic responsibility. *Privatio* for Augustine was the essence of sin – for it was governed by undisciplined *amor sui*. Those who have viewed the origin of 'interiority' in Augustine (like Charles Taylor, for example) need to be closer readers of Augustine's texts. For, as in Plato, this interiority is always and only negotiated with respect to the public and dialogical. All the conversion points in Augustine *Confessiones* are structured dialectically – with respect to others. Sociality is then key to the realisation of the heavenly city and the virtuous subject; sociality is a consequence of what is virtually real. For the process of discernment is necessarily a public activity. People are forced to become reflective, communicative, and responsive interpretants of what is being given in the world around them.

The ecclesial and liturgical centre for this virtual Kingdom in Christ is the eucharist. The site of the mass is the place where the invisible is made visible and the eschatological is realised only to be deconstructed in the breaking and dispersal of the bread and, finally, the "*Ita. Missa est.*" The virtuality is then one of sacramental presence which can never be grasped as such.

Cybersurfing

There are several definitions and forms of virtuality reality with respect to computers. Michael Heim identifies six – "the appearance of simulated 3D space on 2D monitors; interaction with electronic representations; immersion in hard- and software environments; the telepresence familiar from keyhole surgery; 'full-body immersion' permitting interaction with digital environments without constricting hardware; and immersive network communications, which allow more than one user to create and interact in virtual space." To these Sean Cubitt adds a seventh: the phototechnologies and electronic arts of camera and projection.[5] Each of these involve a categorical philosophical distinction between the virtual and the real as Tim Jordan's single definition makes evident: "Cyberspace can be called the virtual lands, with virtual lives and virtual societies, because these lives and societies do not exist with the same physical reality that 'real' societies do. With the emergence of cyberspace, the virtual becomes counterposed to the real. The physical exists in cyberspace but is reinvented. Virtuality is the general term for this reinvention of familiar physical space in cyberspace."[6] There are numerous complexities that issue from this categorical philosophical distinction and Jordan's definition shows us something of what they are. He announces that there is something called "physical reality" only in the same clause to qualify his real societies with inverted commas. Inverted commas qualify in ambivalent ways: they do not state the nature of the ambivalence only mark it in a way that makes it endlessly open to interpretation. Furthermore, the observation that the physical exists in cyberspace but is reinvented assumes that physicality outside of cyberspace is self-evident and unmediatized. We are at the heart of a contemporary problematic here that, in some sense, virtual reality instantiates in an exemplary way: the complexity and over-determination of representation. At the end of empiricism and in the sway of the simulacrum what does the act of representation mean ? Jordan's definition views virtual reality as a translation process from "familiar physical space" to "cyberspace", via digitality as the mode of representation. But whose familiarity is being appealed to here ? What common consensus of the real is being appealed to ? And when we look at, say, *Tomb Raiders* or *CyberCity*, is it the familiar we see ? What is familiar about the familiar such that there is a recognition ? Are we talking here about the recognisability of certain representations and what makes them recognisable ? These are complex questions that a neat distinctions between the real and virtual, offline and online, masks and, finally, evades.

But today we cannot evade these questions. VR is situated within a matrix of ideas and beliefs that make it appear as one of those the mirrors at the back of seventeenth century Dutch interiors. VR reflects back preoccupations with the nature of representation and the mediation of meaning that go back to at least the linguistic turn in twentieth century philosophy and the attention to semiotics. VR not only itself a reflection upon the cultural situation it is produced within, but also intensification of the questions concerning 'reality', 'irreality' and 'hyperreality' or what Umberto Eco has called the industry of the Absolute fake.[7] These questions circulate around the invention, and now the eclipse, of the real.

In *Cities of God*, I pointed out that the word 'real' is a late Mediaeval invention. Prior to that, and for a long time afterwards (at least until the sixteenth

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[5] *Digital Aesthetics*, London: Sage, 1998, pp.31-2.
[6] *Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet*. London: Routledge, 1999, p.1.
[7] *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperreality*, tr.William Weaver, London: Verso, 1986.

century), the real was rendered by the Latin term *vere* – the true – and *vere* could not be separated from God as the condition for the possibility and continuance of the true. *Realia* came to describe the truth of the world in and of itself, but for a long time the world could not be viewed in and of itself. It could not be viewed as an immanent totality, only as a dependent upon and therefore shot through with transcendent significance. *Realia* becomes reality then when the world become opaque, reified in all the complex associations of that word, disenchanted in the way Max Weber understood that term. There is much to suggest in contemporary is bearing witness to the eclipse of the real as *realia*, and it is within the cultural conditions of a new re-enchantment that VR is produced and productive.

How this eclipse came about is a question we will have to put on one side, but one of the forces behind the shift is undoubtedly the commodification of meaning fostered by late capitalism. And VR cannot be divorced from developments in capitalism which themselves have demanded a global economics and an international space for the free flow of information. If the commodification of meaning has reified or fetishized objects – giving them a market-allure or eros beyond what they are in themselves – that VR has to be understood as implicated in that commodification and the production of desire. As consumers we are increasingly being oriented towards the spectacle and the spectacular, to a gazing that cannot be separated from a wanting to have, from an eros. The French sociologist, Jean Baudrillard speaks of the "neo-capitalist cybernetic order." By this he means that culturally, like the computer, we are increasingly producing (and products of) simulacra. There are three orders of such simulacra, according to Baudrillard in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (a book used in a montage shot, ironically, in the film about VR, *The Matrix*). I quote in full because Baudrillard points to how the religious and the cybernetic become culturally associated:

> Simulacra that are natural, naturalist, founded on the image, on imitation and counterfeit, that are harmonious, optimistic, and that aim for the restitution or the ideal institution of nature made in God's image;
> simulacra that are productive, productivist, founded on energy, force, its materialization by the machine and in the whole system of production – a Promeathean aim of a continuous globalization and expansion, of an indefinite liberation of energy (desire belongs to the utopias related to this order of simulacra);
> simulacra of simulation, founded on information, the model, the cybernetic game – total operationality, hyperreality, aim of total control.[8]

The cultural effect of these three orders of simulacra is: "the gestation of the real; there is no more fiction."[9]

From this we can begin to see what is distinctive about today's virtual kingdoms compared with the Platonic and the Christian, whilst also seeing how such kingdoms are not entirely disassociated with the metaphysics and theologies of their forebears. First, we can observe the inversion of platonism in contemporary simulacra and their consumption. Only the surface form has meaning, a meaning that can be endlessly replicated "by the machine and the whole system of production" from digitalisation to advertising. There are no objects as such, for each object is reduced to what it signifies or can be made to signify and as signs they are without depth and so

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[8] *Simulacra and Simulation*, tr. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p.121.
[9] ibid., p.122.

can be freely associated with each other. This free association of signs is evident in any number of "cybernetic games" where dinosaurs and robots, trolls, demons, gods of the ancient world, Roman gladiators and lazar guns can be brought together syncretistically in an interactive drama focussed on conflict, necessary and arbitrary violence. Nevertheless this inversion of Platonism is not without its metaphysical allusions. It resonates with an idealism and a utopianism - the establishment of peace and harmony through the satisfaction and bring to a consummating rest of desire. Though in fact the desire cannot be consummated for then desire that "belongs to the utopias related to this order of simulacra" would cease. What is sought then, through the electronic sublime and the production of the virtually real, the better than the real, the hyperreal, is an eros whose telos is its deferral of consummation. That is, an eros whose telos is postponed but continually promised and reimagined. What simulacra produce is a desire for the endless continuation of desire. As Baudrillard points out this desire for the infinite circulation of desire (in which one's own desirability figures large) plays with a certain utopia and is it this that gives VR its transcendental allure. The allure, or what I would call, its pop transcendence, is an effect of the deterritorialisation it produces. This deterritorialisation can be understood in two senses. The first, according to the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in which it is the ontological character of the flows and fluxes of an atomised reality itself. Selfhood and identity are open-ended constructs, complex mobilities, projects that always bear the marks of a fundamental bricolage. The second reading of deterritorialisation is according to the postmodern geographer Edward Soja.[10] Here it refers to the weakening sense of belonging to a specific place, defined community, culture or state. Borders are porous so that one is continually crossing and recrossing and producing a "third space" which is characterised as hybrid and international. Transcendence in both senses issues from the experience of being globally networked and fluidly belonging to any number of locations and identities. It issues from the eros, seemingly infinite freedom and creativity of technopower. Technopower is a prosthetic expansion of personal power. It is in the practice of this expanded power that the experience of transcendence occurs. Though a distinction must be drawn between self-transcendence and an experience of the transcendent. When the philosopher emerges from the cave and learns to look into the sun itself, then Plato is clear that the sun illuminates. One might argue the power of the sun has drawn the philosopher into a direct contemplation of its transcendent goodness and beauty and truth. When, in the garden at Ostia, Augustine experiences a union with the divine or, in the garden at Milan, is spoken to out of the Scriptures, he is in no doubt that the grace of God has vouchsafed to him new understandings and revelations. For both Plato and Augustine the experiences of the transcendent are experiences of a profound exteriority. They are experiences of self-transcendence but experiences of the transcendent. Cybersurfing 'transcendence' is manufactured at every level – from the Gates development of Windows and Internet Explorer, to the composers of Java-script, to the writers and designers of web-sites and the wizards of MUDs. The experiences of transcendence are all immanent to cyberspace itself. God here is in cyberspace, is the infinite productivity of cyberspace itself or what Baudrillard termed "an indefinite liberation of energy". Both of the metaphysical and the geographical forms of 'transcendences' are related to the experience of surfing in what appears infinity with a highly weakened sense of self or, put more positively, a much more Protean view of identity.

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[10] *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp.151-2.

This conception of VR is not without its theological connotations. As Baudrillard notes, the utopic desire is for paradise regained. It does not simply then invert Plato's virtual kingdom it aims at the instantiation of Augustine's virtual kingdom; its desire (which as I have said, it cannot never allow itself to consummate[11]) is for a realised eschatology. And realised eschatologies, as the final chapters of the New Testament demonstrate, have always been characterised by supernatural energies and semperternal light. VRs offer an electronic version of the sublime, a technologization of the sacred, as one commentator puts it.[12] It offers to turn men and women into angels; that is, creatures composed entirely of light and energy and communication.[13] But these are angels beyond good and evil, for the relativism and the arbitrary nature of information while not being neutral[14] cannot sustain a coherent moral vision. VR offers an apotheosis of liberalism's 'ethic' of *laissez-faire*; in fact, censorship can only be viewed as damage.

But if VR is both interactive (soliciting, involving and perpetuating desire) and experienced (as a self-transcending, interconnectivity of global magnitude) we need to enquire into its mode of participation and the formation of the subject that ensues. I suggest VR implicates subjects in the teleology of the game, that is, in short-term goals/ achievements. The 'formation' that issues from this is the formation of the fashionable – that is, it is formation committed to a perpetual present. As I pointed out above, a realised eschatology informs the metaphysics of cyberspatial interaction. There is no formation-towards-the-future, no constitutive presence of the future. In fact, the cyberspatial experience is one in which the future is here, now, to be lived in. Desire cannot then be disciplined in terms of what is presently lacking (but which the future will realise). The interactive experience cannot function dialectically. So, while participation as with Plato and Christianity, is made possible on the basis of the production and operation of desire, in VR the mode of participation is anti-Platonic and anti-eschatological. The formation that ensues is rhizomatic, hybrid, eclectic. Rather than moving towards a wholeness, the subject fragments or, put positively, diversifies in a multiplicity of avatars and alter egos. We might follow Deleuze and Guattari in suggesting that desire is organised on the immanent plane according to intensities (rather than temporal extension). The ephemeral and disconnected nature and these intensities encourages micro-practices. And since these micro-practices involve simulacra then any virtues arising for this formation are themselves holographic and sustainable only for the time that the simulation is being entertained, or is entertaining. Furthermore, this emphasis upon the present not only renders the future anorexic, it turns the past into a series of short-term memory bites. Such micro-practices foster a participation without a tradition, so that nothing is handed on and

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[11] Tim Jordan, "An abstract hunger for a virtually infinite amount of information is created and that can never be satisfied", p.128.

[12] Christopher Ziguras, 'The Technologization of the Sacred: Virtual Reality and the New Age' in David Holmes (ed.), *Virtual Politics: Identity and Community in Cyberspace* (London: Sage, 1997), pp.197-211.

[13] For a development of this idea see Michel Serres, *Angels* (Paris: Flammarion, ****)

[14] We have to distinguish between ethics and values. The manufacture and development of VR is governed by certain values. For example, the development by Microsoft of Windows 95, then 97, then Millennial Windows and Windows XP is governed by the values of easy access and the democratising of access. The improvements to the microprocessor by Pentium is governed by the values of speed and larger memory capacity to facilitate more complex programmes. But these values are not of themselves ethical. They are values dictated by the market, competing agencies, future projections for further expansion and greater control. VR is not then value-free, and the flows of information it makes possible are structured by these values, but while some of this information may be of an ethical nature information is conceived as a pure commodity beyond ethical proscription.

nothing is related back. Virtue is then separated from virtuality. But then what is virtual about virtual reality ? For there are no concealed, inherent potentials since everything is available. The only potentials lie in technological advances – the speed of downloading, the extent of the immersion that is possible – further turns in what has been called the technopower spiral.[15] Formation concerns the development of hyperindividualism (customized surfing routes and cyberspatial journeys creating the illusion of freedom), but a hyperindividualism continually inventing and deconstructing itself.

The Virtues of VR

The grammatical logic of cyberspace is asyndeton; whereas the grammatical logic of Platonism is synecdoche; and the grammatical logic of Christian eschatology is catachresis. Meaning gets lost in the proliferation of serial simulations; this is the nihilistic drift of VR that operates beneath even the construction of cyber-communities and the democratisation of access and information. The subjects it forms will not be moral subjects; they will be assimilationists or morphs. With VR we have finally collapsed the social into the cultural, for all sociality becomes mediatized - to use Habermas's term.[16] The social implodes. We might see Baudrillard's three orders of simulacra as three stages, with VR as the final stage in the production of an imaginary society. But this virtual kingdom, that turns education into the acquisition of skills for manipulating and producing information, only endlessly feeds upon itself – deepening its own dream of becoming real. We are caught in the circular ruins of Luis Borges' short story, dreaming ever more profoundly of simulacra and fantasizing ever more persistently of an apocalyptic awakening.

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[15] Tim Jordan, "The amount of information in cyberspace is so vast as to appear infinite to each individual user. This infinity creates an abstract desire or hunger to find important pieces of information in cyberspace. This desire leads users of cyberspace into information overload because they are searching virtually infinite amounts of information. This overload in then managed by introducing new technological tools designed to control the information flow. But this merely leads to a new form of information overload and to a new desire for a new technological tool. Each technology is used as a tool but is created according to values and so is a moment of technopower. A spiral of technopower exists in cyberspace", p.101.
[16] *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p.232.