The Virtual Field:

Narrative Games and the Experience of Space

by

Eli Neumann

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for those who inspire me

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Abstract

When reading, watching, or playing texts, we experience something like existing in multiple spaces at the same time. How does this happen? This thesis develops the virtual field as a model for understanding this phenomenon, or in other words, the relationship between virtuality and Being-in-the-world. Virtuality in this sense refers to a space of possibility, meaning-making, and imagination, which often applies to mediated spaces such as digital media but could extend to physical spaces as well. The application of the virtual field this thesis focuses on is narrative video games, specifically *The Last of Us*, due to its heavy use of interaction and simulation.

The approach to the development of the virtual field as a theoretical model borrows from multiple fields, such as game studies, phenomenology, narrative theory, philosophy of language, and literary theory. Following the trend of scholars looking for alternative frameworks from the pessimism and paranoia of postmodernism, the virtual field aims to provide an understanding of the integrated nature of experience with the world, and the positive possibilities such an integration holds.

The introduction provides an overview of *The Last of Us* and the experience of playing such narrative video games. It also outlines the basics of the virtual field, and why *The Last of Us* was chosen as the narrative video game to focus on.

The first chapter continues the discussion of the experience of playing *The Last of Us* by analyzing its narrative design. We then explore the phenomenological framework that the rest of the thesis builds upon, incorporating Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* in order to illustrate the subjective position of the player/reader referred to in later chapters. The key question for this chapter is how to understand our situated Being-in-the-world in relation to other objects and the environment itself.

The second chapter then puts together the model of the virtual field, focusing on the three aspects that comprise it: the poetic imagination as developed by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*; the concept of virtuality according to Marie-Laure Ryan, plus an example of virtuality existing in physical spaces with ruins; and finally the concept of dialogism from Mikhail Bakhtin. All three of these aspects relate to our experience of being-in-the-world, and when put in conversation with each other they make up a more complete model, which can be applied further to questions of ethics, psychology, philosophy of art, and more.

The final chapter then applies the virtual field to the experience of *The Last of Us*, and briefly to A.R. Ammons' poem "Admission."

Keywords: narrative video games, virtuality, the virtual field, space, possible worlds theory, imagination, dialogism, *The Last of Us*, phenomenology, narrative design, game studies

I translate into the language of an abstract worldview that which was the object of concrete and living

artistic visualization and which then became a principle of form. Such a translation is always

inadequate.

-   Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*

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INTRODUCTION

Beginnings

The world wore away. The virus continued to spread, and nothing could stop it. People died. People close to you died. Martial law was instated, people were corralled, and you witnessed as many were left to die as nothing could be done for them. Buildings withered down, roads broke apart, time stopped. Plants and natural life grew over everything. The few remaining struggled to survive. Your home ceased to exist.

It is not difficult to imagine this happening if the trajectory of the COVID-19 pandemic went another direction. Although this picture describes what happened in the world of the 2013 narrative video game and HBO television show *The Last of Us*, engaging with the story now in 2023 provides a different experience of it from pre-2020. We have to ask ourselves whether this could have been – or could still be – our not-too-distant future. How do we survive in such a world? What would life be like? Could you imagine your intimate spaces as a ruin in some future apocalypse? Playing the game and becoming a character in its world forces us to reckon with such possibility. The experience of wading through a museum that has floors caving in, pools of water, and fungus growing on the walls while recognizing the familiar artifacts of American history creates a sense of existing in multiple spaces at once: the physical space of the room you are sitting in while playing the game, the world of the game you are seeing and interacting with, and the imaginative virtual space your mind creates through a combination of the other two, as you consciously or unconsciously consider the possible overlap of the two worlds; you have visited museums before, you recognize the spaces of the game both for what

they are and what they represent as once being, just as the moment you witness war-torn ruins and wonder what life there was like prior to their destruction.

It is this experience that I will explore in this thesis. How, when engaging in such virtual spaces as ruins or narrative video games, do we have the experience of existing in multiple spaces at once? How do virtual spaces and physical spaces relate to each other, and how do we interact with them? This phenomenon is not limited to the experience of playing narrative video games, but also happens in daily life as well. When you look at a photograph of some foreign land, or watch a movie, or look at people walking by on the street and for a brief moment imagine what they might be like, are all instances of experiencing multiple spaces simultaneously. The key factor in this experience is the imagination, particularly the poetic imagination, but imagination alone is not providing the full experience.[1] There are two more factors at work: virtuality, and dialogism. Together, these three elements make up what I refer to as *the virtual field*, which is the basis through which we not only experience the phenomena described above, but also how we experience space itself.

The world exists with the subjective consciousness in it as a virtual space, and as the subjective consciousness moves through the world it uses the poetic imagination to generate meaning upon the world and thus the world becomes a platform through which meaning exists, which in turn can create new meaning in the mind of the subjective consciousness, and the act of meaning-making creates a dialogic system in which the subjective consciousness and the world interact with and depend on each other. This is the basic process of the virtual field. Utilizing Bakhtin's concept of dialogism in the

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[1] The poetic imagination is a term from Gaston Bachelard, and will be developed further later in the thesis.

virtual field provides an additional dimension to the model.[2] Through Bakhtin's exploration of how to understand our relationship to the world through what it means to be unique, autonomous, Beings moving through time and space and the ethical implications of this, and using concepts of dialogism, eventness, and more to do so, what the model of the virtual field as applied to narrative video games effectively does is to suggest that these games improve our ethical understanding beyond simply developing empathy; they make us more ethical by the nature of their detailed, interactive representations that build upon the aim of long novels (such as Tolstoy's) to provide a copious amount of detail and context necessary for evaluating and acting ethically in any given situation. My point is that the phenomenon we are working towards understanding is the simultaneous experience of multiple spaces through the virtual field, but there are other important implications of this model that future research could explore.

For the sake of providing a brief synopsis of *The Last of Us*, it begins in the Autumn of 2013 when the cordyceps fungus, which infects insects to take over their bodies and control them, mutates to infect humans. With no known cure or way to control the outbreak, the zombie-like infection spreads rapidly and causes the collapse of civilization. The main narrative is set twenty years after the outbreak, and the player controls the main protagonist, Joel, as he is tasked with smuggling an immune fourteen year old girl, Ellie, across the United States to a group known as the Fireflies, who are working to develop a vaccine. Along the way, Joel and Ellie encounter numerous "infected" – people who succumbed to the cordyceps fungus and became zombie-like creatures – as well as various factions of

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[2] M.M. Bakhtin (1895-1975), a Russian scholar whose notable works include *The Dialogic Imagination, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, *Rabelais and His World*, and *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*.

people doing what they feel is necessary to survive, whether the Fireflies who are trying to reestablish a democratic United States as it used to be, or groups like the Hunters in Pittsburgh who hunt and kill other people for food and supplies. Although much of the gameplay involves fighting against these various threats, the core of the game is its narrative involving the development of Joel and Ellie's relationship.

In relation to *The Last of Us*, the virtual field operates on two distinct levels: the level of the art-object, and the level of the world which contains the art-object and its player. Virtuality exists in the medium itself as a digital video game, but also in its representation of a post-apocalyptic United States. This environment has become virtual in the sense that what the in-game characters and the player sees and interacts with is an environment of what once was, rather than what is or will be. Virtuality of this kind will be explored later during a discussion of ruins. As for the second level of virtuality, *The Last of Us* is useful because it utilizes narrative devices and interactivity which stimulates the player and their relation to the real world. For example, there is a heavy use of what Henry Jenkins calls "environmental storytelling," which is the use of the game's environment as part of the narrative process.[3] Aside from serving to enhance the narrative of the game, it also works to show the player that the environment and objects in it can be infused with meanings beyond their surface functionality. It is through this idea that Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, introduced later, becomes necessary for understanding how the relationship between people and their environment works.

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[3] Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture,"
https://web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/games&narrative.html.

Therefore, *The Last of Us* will illustrate the concept of the virtual field and how it allows us to understand the relationship between art and our experience of Being-in-the-world. Despite all the advantages the game has for this purpose, it is not the only art-object I could have chosen. The virtual field could be applied to any art-object. It dictates our fundamental perceptions and interactions with the world. As is described in a following section, we overlay the world around us with a virtual lens made up of our subjective perceptions, and that has an important role in shaping how we see and interact with the world. Additionally, art by its fundamental nature is a mode of subjective expression, and therefore inherently tied with this virtual overlay. *The Last of Us* will be the primary example I use for the application of the virtual field, but I invite other scholars to apply the model and methods found herein to other art-objects and aspects of human experience in general.

CHAPTER ONE: *The Last of Us*

The Last of Us as an Art-Object

Playing *The Last of Us*, like other narrative video games, interacting with and existing within their worlds feels different from engaging with other types of texts, whether novels, poems, film, or any other representational medium. Why is that? In his book on virtuality and the novel, Timothy Gao notes that the concept of virtuality predates digital media.[4] It was attached to the recognition of the role of imagination when reading texts, but this notion was discarded in literary criticism and theory in favor of other methods of analyzing texts and the act of reading. In contemporary discourse, it is difficult to deny the importance of subjective, affective, readings of texts, and thus the concept of virtuality is worth revitalizing as Gao has done. However, does imagination play a different role in narrative video games than in other mediums? To start exploring this question, we will look at how the narrative design of *The Last of Us* operates, and how it contributes to the experience of the game.

Writing a narrative video game takes on multiple forms aside from simply writing a script for actors, or an outline of the plot. Narrative design, as it is known in game development, is a broad endeavor that takes into account the writing of the literal story, the art design, and the gameplay elements which work in tandem with the other two. Henry Jenkins was early to note how narrative

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[4] Timothy Gao, *Virtual Play and the Victorian Novel: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Fictional Experience*, 4.

video games are made up of various elements which together serve an overarching story rather than there being only two elements, the story and the game mechanics. In his essay "Game Design as Narrative Architecture," he writes "for an understanding of game designers less as storytellers and more as narrative architects."[5] This is because game designers are not only creating a two dimensional text as a novelist would, but they are creating a virtual space which utilizes different forms of narrativity. According to Jenkins, there are at least four ways that narrative video games do this: "spatial stories can evoke pre-existing narrative associations; they can provide a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; they may embed narrative information within their mise-en-scene; or they provide resources for emergent narratives."[6]

By pre-existing narrative associations, Jenkins refers to situations in which games use familiar visual or other narrative elements that the player will likely already know. One of the examples he uses is amusement parks like Disneyland, in which rides use story elements from familiar Disney movies like Cinderella to evoke associations with that movie, but the ride adapts those elements into the space of an amusement park ride. Narrative video games can use the same technique, often in cases where a game is adapting another piece of media like a film or television show. For *The Last of Us*, the main associations it makes is to other stories from the post-apocalyptic genre, particularly zombie apocalypse stories, due to the heavy presence of zombie-like creatures and a desolate landscape. One example of such a story is *The Walking Dead* in its various iterations as a television show, video game, and comic

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[5] Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture,"
https://web.mit.edu/~21fms/People/henry3/games&narrative.html
[6] Ibid.

book series. Since *The Last of Us* belongs to this genre it will inevitably draw associations to other

works in the genre, but what matters is not how well it uses these associations but rather what larger

narrative or narratives it is contributing to. Jenkins writes, "Increasingly, we inhabit a world of

transmedia story-telling, one which depends less on each individual work being self-sufficient than on

each work contributing to a larger narrative economy."[7] Take the stream of superhero movies that

have been released in the last decade or more; these movies are all adapting the stories of certain

superheroes from the comics initially published about them, but at the same time each movie is

contributing to the larger Marvel Universe world of narratives that make them all connected.[8] *The*

Last of Us is doing this within its own genre, but now with the new HBO adaptation of the game it is

also participating in the transmedia economy of its own world that Jenkins writes of.

The second method Jenkins cites is perhaps the most common case for narrative games. Due to

their interactive nature, narrative designers usually enable the player to enact a narrative sequence

rather than having that narrative sequence passively displayed to the player instead. An example of this

in *The Last of Us* would be the first moment the player assumes control of a character. This character is

Sarah, the main protagonist Joel's daughter. She wakes up in the middle of the night, and her father is

nowhere to be seen. The player must move her around their house in search of clues as to what is going

on.[9] This could have been an extension of the opening scene which is shown to the player in cinematic

style, but instead the decision was made to allow the player to assume control of Sarah and force them

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[7] Ibid.

[8] "Explore the Marvel Universe: Marvel." Marvel Entertainment. https://www.marvel.com/explore.

[9] See Figure 1.

to experience her confusion and navigate the house with her and *as* her.[10] Becoming a character in the

world will be explored in a later section on *virtual-being*.

Fig. 1. *Screenshot of Sarah during the interactive sequence of* The Last of Us*'s prologue.*

The third point Jenkins makes is what has become known as environmental storytelling.

Rather than having the story only told to the player directly through dialogue or interaction as in the

previous point, the virtual space of the game can contain narrative elements that help supplement the

story and possibly provide vital information for the story. *The Last of Us* is known for its use of

environmental storytelling. Just in the sequence described above, the player is able to find information

throughout Sarah and Joel's home that help provide narrative clues and additional information

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[10] Neil Druckmann, interviewed by Christian Spicer, *The Official The Last of Us Podcast*,
https://open.spotify.com/episode/4EFzUuaauWtnr4FxERTRRT?si=aXBiKBjzTM61KUae4bHSQg.

relating to the characters' backgrounds. This is often manifested in objects, usually handwritten letters

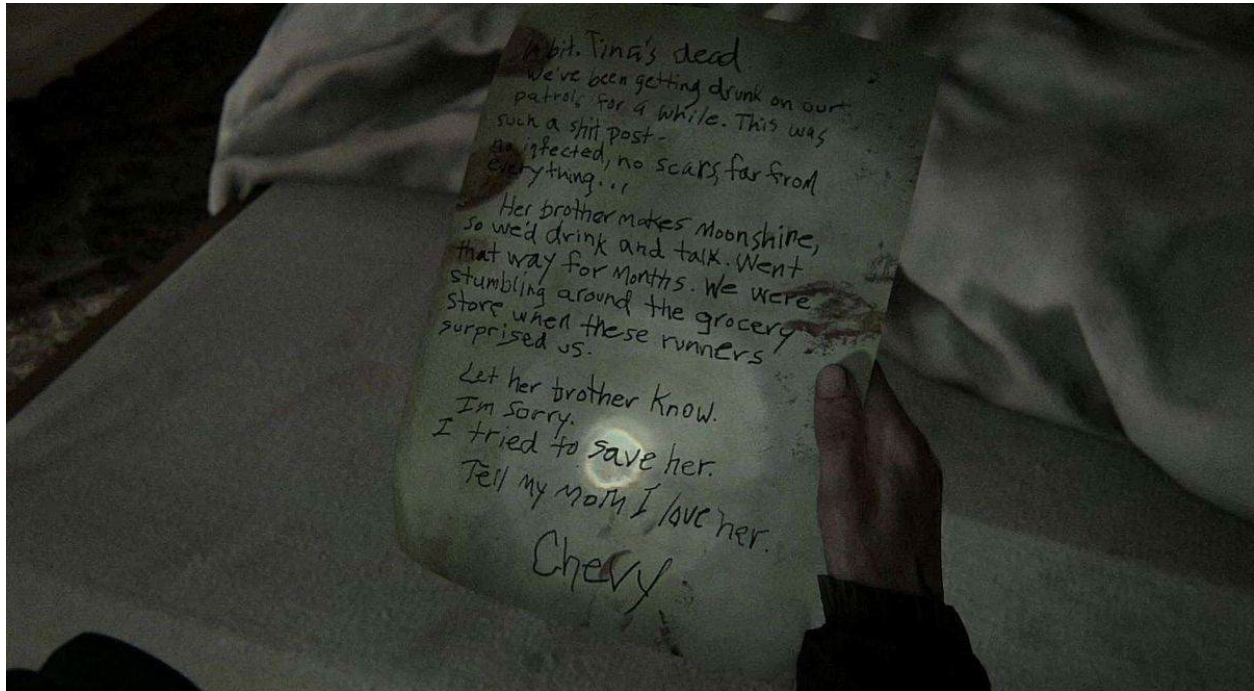throughout the whole of the game, that the player can pick up and look at.[11]

Fig. 2. *Screenshot of a letter found in the world of* The Last of Us Part II.

The fourth point Jenkins makes claims that narrative video games do not always have

prescriptive stories, but rather they can also provide the opportunity for non-scripted narratives to

exist for their players. Games which make this their main premise are often open-world role-playing

games, where rather than providing a linear path for the player to move along, the game world as a

whole is at once available for the player to explore and interact with. During the course of such

exploration, the player can experience a narrative unique to their choices of how they decide to move

throughout the virtual space of the game world. In the case of *The Last of Us* and its sequel, the

narrative is carefully scripted and the game world confined to a limited space, so opportunities for the

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[11] See Figure 2.

player to experience emergent narratives are not as expansive compared to the open-world games. In this case, in order to progress through the game, the player must perform certain actions and follow a certain path through the game world.

As we can see from the narrative design of games like *The Last of Us*, there are several opportunities for engagement to take advantage of, but the question of how these games differ from other mediums has not yet been fully answered. It can be argued that a novel or a film could utilize all of Jenkins' points, although possibly to a lesser extent than narrative video games, but that is not enough for us to solve the problem introduced at the start of this thesis: how to understand the experience of existing in multiple simultaneous spaces when engaging with virtual worlds. It is not enough to analyze how the art-object itself operates, but we need to know what is happening on our end, the subjective side, during this engagement. For that, subjectivity itself should be understood.

Being

The act of Being is an essence, but an essence not isolated. Centered, but with nodes which attach to all other centers. The existence of Being, or *Dasein*, is not an act but an interaction.[12] It has an inseparability from the world; it receives its essence from the essences of all other things.[13] This is

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[12] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 2008). I found Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* useful for my purposes, but I do not intend to use the term exactly as it is intended in his work. His concept is useful because it models subjective experience in terms of situatedness in space and time, which are factors of experience that I explore in relation to virtual spaces.

[13] Horrigan-Kelly; Millar; Dowling, "Understanding the Key Tenets of Heidegger's Philosophy for Interpretive Phenomenological Research," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 15, no. 1 (January-December 2016): 2, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1609406916680634.

the case due to the nature of interaction: *Dasein* encounters an object, that object now affects it. The interaction moves both ways; *Dasein* has been changed. The influence of objects, and other subjects, informs the experience and composition of *Dasein*. Therefore the essence of Being is *Dasein* embedded in the everyday, day-to-day interactions of the world.

Heidegger defines *Dasein* as man's existence, due to the precondition that *Dasein* is aware of its existence. This is a limited view: consciousness, although distinct from an inanimate existence, is not necessarily a superior quality. As we are concerned with Being, the interaction is not limited to the ability to be aware of it. *Dasein* is affected by an external object, but is that object not affected as well? It may not be conscious of a change in its Being, but it has an essence of Being regardless, for it is there. It must hold some remnant of the interaction with an external object to itself, whether that remnant is tangible to *Dasein* or not. Can an object exist in pure isolation, or is it also embedded in the everyday world?

This has implications that Bachelard builds upon.[14] An object encountered by *Dasein* is affected as *Dasein* is affected. Perhaps not in the same way, but the interaction is mutual. Bachelard asks, "can we isolate an intimate, concrete essence that would be a justification of the uncommon value of all of our images of protected intimacy?"[15] The object – as opposed to *Dasein* – he refers to here are our intimate, inhabited spaces, but what is their essence? For it must have one, as he says, we attribute to it an uncommon value since it is only an inanimate object. In this case, Bachelard describes this essence as an attribution bestowed upon the object by *Dasein*, but his question posits the

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[14] Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Two.
[15] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 26.

possibility that its essence is not only attributed by *Dasein* but that it has an isolated and concrete essence which can justify the value attributed to it.

The particular 'object' that Bachelard is interested in are the inhabited spaces in which we exist, and those spaces – not only these spaces, but all objects with which *Dasein* interacts – have an essence and values associated with them due to the interaction between people and the spaces. This is because the essence of an existence of Being is not *Dasein* as Heidegger thinks of it, but simply Being itself. It is *there* as the object is *there*. Being is existence embedded in the world.

As will become clear later, the subject of *Dasein* applies more broadly than to a physical existence in the world. Bachelard points to the imagination as an important factor of a subject's interaction with its environment, which is true. Further, imagination is an important characteristic of virtuality; a concept that will be developed in the following sections. The virtual-subject then is not important here simply because we are discussing video games, but because virtuality is inherent to subjectivity. *Dasein* exists in and through virtuality, as Being projects virtuality onto the physical spaces it is situated within.

Virtual-Being

The other aspect of narrative video games, aside from the multiple ways the narrative may operate, is how the player experiences said narrative within the text-world of the game. The common term for this experiencing of the narrative is 'immersion,' as Ryan uses in *Narrative as Virtual Reality*. This is not an inaccurate use of the term, as it is meant to describe the feeling of existing in the text-

world, but it has been co-opted in colloquial speech to refer to nearly any experience of media that has

a strong effect on a person, such as film, music, novels, theater, etc. The concept of immersion is

theoretically ambiguous to begin with due to its subjective nature created by various media in various

ways. Literary theorists have attempted to redefine the concept by borrowing from other fields such as

psychology and analytic philosophy, and Ryan outlines some of these attempts. The model she

subscribes to and develops comes from the latter of the aforementioned fields, and it is the Possible

Worlds Theory, which I will also build upon. However, rather than continue using the term

'immersion,' I prefer to use *virtual-being*, which is more consistent with the terminology used

throughout this thesis and more specific than 'immersion.'

As the semantic field in linguistics builds a coherent world out of the relationships between

words and their meanings, a text-world builds a coherent world out of the relationships between its

represented objects and meanings. A literary text would be doing this using words, hence the relevance

of the semantic field, but a narrative video game exceeds the use of words by adding visual, auditory,

and sometimes even tactile representations.[16] These representations must meet four criteria for the

text-world to achieve coherence: the objects and characters must be connected as in the actual-world,

the environment should be inhabitable, the world should be intelligible to external observers, and

there should be a field of activity for its members.[17] As the aim of the text-world is to simulate for the

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[16] PlayStation, "DualSense Wireless Controller | The Innovative New Controller for PS5,"
https://www.playstation.com/en-us/accessories/dualsense-wireless-controller/.

[17] Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 91.

reader the experience of Being-in-the-world, coherence is necessary to provide the foundation for it.[18]

Without coherence, the text-world will appear illogical and difficult to engage with, as the reader will

have no clear point of entry. It falls prey to what is known as causing the reader to *not* 'suspend

disbelief.' When the text-world does achieve coherence, it is expected that "the reader constructs in

imagination a set of language-independent objects, using as a guide the textual declarations, but

building this always incomplete image in to a more vivid representation through the import of

information provided by internalized cognitive models, inferential mechanisms, real-life experience,

and cultural knowledge, including knowledge derived from other texts."[19]

Through this process a reader grasps the text-world enough to form a point of entry, but the

model is not yet complete, as Ryan points out. One issue she does not explicitly mention is the

question of whether "language-independent objects" can exist at all. I may say that it should not exist

in this sense, as any object we imagine depends on the language which precedes it. If the text mentions

the word *chair*, then I will imagine objects related to that word from my experience, making those

imagined objects dependent on the word *chair*, their signifier. Additionally, because I can imagine

various objects based on that word, the total representation constructed in my mind is not necessarily

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[18] An objection to this notion may be that the endeavor is simply impossible because signifiers have no stable external referents; any representations within the text-world are arbitrary and may only create an illusion of coherence, which could fall apart and prove inadequate from one moment to the next. After all, any artist knows not to expect uniform responses to their work, not to mention Blanchot's point that the work can never be finished to begin with. However, this does not exclude the consideration that experience tells us that *something* is working – we read and engage with texts on a daily basis, and enjoy them – in order for virtual-being to exist, and it must. Linguistic and reality-crisis questions aside, we know that it is possible to experience virtual-being whether illusory or not. We also know that we fail to experience it when the internal logic of the text-world lacks intelligibility, when it becomes transparent, and engaging with it becomes more of a 'game' than a mimetically simulated experience, as realist genres of novels, film, and narrative video games often try to achieve.

[19] Ryan, 91.

any more coherent regardless of the logic of the text-world. Likewise, when not taken for granted, the

actual-world appears to lack logic as well.

What can be done about this? Well, the phenomenon of reading and enjoying texts due at least

in part to something like coherence does seem to happen, therefore the attempt to model it is not

completely in vain. Ryan's preferred solution is the Possible Worlds Theory. The basis of this model is

that there exists one *actual*-world, and surrounding it are various *possible*-worlds. With the previous

chapter in mind, one could easily think of this in terms of the actual-world and *virtual*-worlds. A

virtual-world in this case is defined by its possibility of becoming actuality, such as the myriad of

possible branches the future could take. Counterfactual hypotheses represent *impossible*-worlds, as

those are closed off and no longer within possibility. The problem with this basis of the PWT model is

how to understand what the actual-world *is* and how it relates to our lived experience. One person may

perceive reality to be different from another, based on religion, historical period, culture, etc. It may

not be possible to access the actual-world at all apart from these subjectivities, or perhaps reality exists

according to a certain process independent of our subjectivities. With this problem in mind, Ryan

modifies the PWT model to say that the *central*-actual-world exists independently of the mind –

objective reality – with other actual-worlds representing individual (and collective) subjectivities

overlapping with the central actual-world. Then the non-actualized virtual-worlds exist at various

distances away from the cluster of actual-worlds, depending on how connected they are to the reality

of the actual-worlds.[20] This is a convenient conception, since it bypasses the need to posit what exactly

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[20] Ibid. 100-102.

objective reality is, instead using the model to say that one reality exists despite the subjective mind, but because of the subjective mind other realities can exist. When applied to the act of reading, the text prior to engagement by the reader exists as a virtual-world, and as the reader engages with it – if the text achieves coherence – the text-world becomes actualized in the imagination of the reader. Thus the text-world operates as an actual-world, overlapping with the central-actual-world outside of the text.

The question of objective reality, the central-actual-world, is important to note despite its apparent lack of direct influence on our problem at hand of virtual-being. To accept the concept of the central-actual-world, that is to say there exists a reality independent of the mind because the mind perceives reality through the mediation of the senses and therefore has no direct experience of reality, is to also say that embeddedness in the world, Being-in-the-world or virtual-being, is not a quality of reality itself. In other words, an atom is closer to objective reality than I am because it does not perceive its own existence – but it still does not alone constitute objective reality. What then constitutes objective reality? All atoms and the laws by which they behave? Am I not atoms? Is my perception of the world not a peculiar behavior of atoms? The notion of the central-actual-world is a myth which pretends that existence can transcend material situatedness, the ever-changing, evolving, experience of Being-in-the-world. This is all that there can be, as far as we know, because if something higher reveals itself, then it becomes like the rest of us – atoms in the void.

What does this mean for Ryan's conception of the PWT model? First to come to mind might be an anti-relativist's nightmare: the lack of objective reality. Take the central-actual-world out of the model and then you have only actual-worlds representing various subjective perceptions of reality, without any standard to measure them to. However, this layer of the model also needs to be reworked.

It is not that there are multiple actual-worlds overlapping each other, but rather there is – back to where we started – one actual-world which *contains* these sub-actual-worlds. In this case, the actual-world is not a stand-in for objective reality independent of the mind, but the world in which all things are embedded and experiencing existence. This means that the text-world is just as much a part of the actual-world as a coffee shop or your daydream. An actualization of something which interacts with the actual-world becomes actualized within it, and affects it. This is why Bachelard's insights about the poetic imagination shows how virtuality, imagination, *fiction*, can become manifest in actuality. In this sense, virtual-being is the state in which the player/reader not only 'enters' the text-world, but where the text-world moves from being in the realm of possible-worlds to the actual-world, initially in the mind of the player/reader but gradually outwards as they infuse their subjective reality in the actual-world with the reality of the text-world.

The Last of Us embodies this process well. First, its text-world is able to achieve coherence by virtue of its convincing worldbuilding and narrative design as shown in the previous section. The game is known for its attention to detail in terms of its environment, character features and behaviors, and dialogue as well.[21] Therefore, as the player enters this world, they easily adopt a state of virtual-being within it. Additionally, the game makes the process of moving from the player's imagination into the actual-world particularly powerful through its representations of easily identifiable landmarks of the United States. Even if a player does not live in any of the locations that are represented in the game,

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[21] Pingal, "The Last of Us 2: Devs Explain Their Insane Attention-To-Detail Process."

such as Boston, Pittsburgh, or Salt Lake City, they could find photos of those locations from the

actual-world and compare them.

Fig. 3. *Screenshot from* The Last of Us *during the sequence set in Boston.*

The point is that an effect is created which essentially acts as the reverse of the experience of ruins

described in the previous chapter. When seeing the real locations of the actual-world, they suddenly

take on the added layer of associations the player acquired from the text-world. Due to the

environment of *The Last of Us* being largely characterized by ruins, the player in virtual-being also

experiences the ruin effect as well.

This may prove that *The Last of Us* achieves coherence through convincing worldbuilding and

thus instills in the player some sort of immersion, but what exactly is *virtual-being* in terms of what the

experience of it is like? As was said above, the state of virtual-being is the experience of Being within

the actual-world, engaging with a possible-world, which then actualizes within the actual-world. When

playing *The Last of Us*, during the opening sequence when you control Sarah's character for example, you experience a sense of immersion in the world as your mind – imagination – is filled with its people, environment, and events. As you walk through the hallway of your home, from your bedroom to your father's, only to find him absent with his bedsheets ruffled and light from the TV flashing against the walls, the newscaster reporting on something happening at the downtown hospital when a sudden explosion knocks out the signal, the TV goes static, and through the window you see the explosion expand into the night sky – you are present in the text-world, but afterwards, after putting the controller down, that experience you had remains with you. Perhaps it becomes associated with windows at night, or as you walk through your actual hallway in the quiet of the night you might feel a spike of fear like something is amiss. The emotions and meanings associated with them stay with you and manifest in the actual-world.

This is the state of virtual-being. It is the subjective experience of the virtual field, which will be explored next. There are three elements at work here that build upon virtual-being, involving how the subjective consciousness interacts with these spaces. The three elements are virtuality, the poetic imagination, and dialogism. We have already begun exploring the poetic imagination and virtuality, but these two concepts will be analyzed in more depth.

CHAPTER TWO: The Virtual Field

Poetic Imagination

As I sit in my office writing these words, my mind wanders across the books and photographs, poems taped to the wall, my father's plaques nailed above my computer, the dusty desktop, ashes, a still-steaming cup of tea and the string holding the tea bag tied over the cup's lip. Most offices, whether at home or at one's place of work, are adorned with such things. The usual family photographs, framed diplomas, postcards, and coffee mugs fill up this space; the room feels more personal, more comfortable, more like *home*. Think of your home now. What does your living room, your kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, look like? What is there to say of these most singular places, and the worlds they create; the very spaces in which we whittle away the sunlight and hours? Even if you have scarce decorations or if all your bedroom has is a bed and dresser, that space which was once empty has been filled with something more than just those objects. After all, it is the space in which you sleep and dream. It is intimate and knows you in your most vulnerable state. What is evoked within you when you step into your childhood bedroom? These spaces have acquired layers of meaning beyond their simple architectural details.

It is this fact which Bachelard explores in his seminal work *The Poetics of Space*. Published in 1958, *Space* became Bachelard's most well-known work since his intellectual turn from being a

philosopher of science to a philosopher of the imagination.[22] He begins this text with the disclaimer:

"A philosopher who has evolved his entire thinking from the fundamental themes of the philosophy

of science, and followed the main line of the active, growing rationalism of contemporary science as

closely as he could, must forget his learning and break with all his habits of philosophical research, if he

wants to study the problems posed by the poetic imagination."[23] Bachelard refers to the strict

rationalism of the positivist movement in philosophical and scientific study in the 19th century, which

"confines itself to the data of experience and excludes a priori or metaphysical speculations."[24]

Imagination is a product of the mind by some sort of configuration, and as such has been subjected to

study by psychologists, psychoanalysts, and philosophers of the mind alike. Why are their

methodologies not enough to adequately study imagination, and specifically poetic imagination? And

what does he mean by poetic imagination?

The answer to these questions rests in how he understands human consciousness and its role in

what he refers to as "productive imagination,"[25] the sort of imagination that is not simply idle thought

but creative thinking. For Bachelard, there is a division between *mind* and *soul*, a dualism which refers

to analytic thinking versus intuitive thinking. Analytic thinking is the same as the positivist method

mentioned above, focused on the 'concrete' thinking mind. Intuitive thinking is what Bachelard

believes poets and other artists engage in when they go about their creative work. It is separate from the

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[22] Bachelard remained a philosopher of science throughout his career as a professor of history and the philosophy of science at the University of Paris. Although his foray into phenomenology and the imagination came towards the latter half of his career, he continued to produce research in his main fields of science and history.

[23] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 1.

[24] Feigl, "positivism," Encyclopedia Britannica, August 28, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/topic/positivism.

[25] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 18.

analytical mind, coming from a source which cannot be reduced to or deduced with logic. It is a priori knowledge, metaphysical in nature. "The poet, in the novelty of his images, is always the origin of language."[26] He refers to the creative spark that ignites in the mind of an artist when they have what is colloquially known as a 'lightbulb moment,' and the corresponding spark in the mind of the reader/viewer/player of the artwork when an image strikes them and suddenly a host of associations and meanings emerge. According to Bachelard, each of these moments has no "data of experience" to gather and analyze outside of the moment of experience itself. The moment occurred, and the data that is produced is the artwork itself, or the emotions and meanings left with the artist or reader/viewer/player. "A poetic image eludes causality. Doctrines that are timidly causal, such as psychology, or strongly causal, such as psychoanalysis, can hardly determine the ontology of what is poetic."[27] This is why Bachelard believes that a scientific study of the poetic imagination cannot work. The experience of the poetic imagination is instantaneous, and therefore slippery when subjugated to analysis.

As he states in the introduction to *Space*, the scientific method of analysis he was so used to as a philosopher of science seemed "to be an insufficient basis on which to found a metaphysics of the imagination."[28] This is his ultimate goal with *Space* and other books he wrote on the topic. A

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[26] Bachelard, 4. Throughout this book, Bachelard focuses on the poet as the primary practitioner of this creative force, but any artistic endeavor utilizes the same concepts he describes. An artist of any kind must be at "the origin of language" like a poet must.

[27] Bachelard, 9.

[28] Bachelard, 3.

metaphysics of the imagination would enable us to understand its phenomenology and ontology, at least as closely as possible. His guiding question then naturally follows:

> How can an image, at times very unusual, appear to be a concentration of the entire psyche?
>
> How – with no preparation – can this singular, short-lived event… react on other minds and in other hearts, despite all the barriers of common sense…? It seemed to me, then, that this transsubjectivity of the image could not be understood, in its essence, through the habits of subjective reference alone. Only phenomenology – that is to say, consideration of the *onset of the image* in an individual consciousness – can help us to restore the subjectivity of images and to measure their fullness, their strength and their transsubjectivity.[29]

In order to develop a metaphysics of the imagination, he uses phenomenology to study the experience of the poetic imagination, and more specifically the poetic image, to get at what this experience is. It is through the study of poetry and the specific poetic device he singles out, the poetic image, which enacts the imagination into its most raw and powerful form of art, that he will understand human imagination, and ultimately, what it means to be human.

However, poetry is not the object of our study. It is also not narrative video games for that matter. We are investigating the experience of Being-in-the-world, and how the virtual field models that experience. As an aspect of the virtual field, the poetic imagination describes the way in which subjectivities generate meaning, and how that meaning can exist attached to the world around the subjective consciousness. The transsubjectivity of the poetic image is the transsubjectivity of the poetic

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[29] Bachelard, 3-4.

imagination, and imaginative meaning-making exists transsubjectively. As in the process of the poet being a site of meaning creation, transferring the created poetic image to their reader creating a new site of meaning creation as Bachelard describes, *Dasein* moving through the world of other subjectivities is a field of meaning sites – interacting platforms for the possibility of meaning.

Virtuality

There is a demarcation between what is *virtual* and what is *actual*. This is different from the notion of unreal versus real, if real refers to the world of the last section in which Being exists. Virtual in this case refers to the possible, non-actualized realm of possibility. It is not that what is virtual is fake, impossible, escapist, or purely representational, but rather it is that which Bachelard might refer to as the space of daydreaming; a space which is in flux with the rest of the world.

Jean Baudrillard would not necessarily disagree with this assessment. However, he fears that what defines our modern age is that of the virtual. "Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation [or virtualization] is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal."[30] We surround ourselves with what is known as virtual reality, or augmented reality, with our digital devices and endless procession of screens. What Baudrillard warns of as the hyperreal, he refers to the seeming impossibility of tracing back any of our virtual representations to something

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[30] Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1.

which is truly physical and *real*. Consider today's internet culture. Even if you find the original source

for a meme, its original posting, who are the people who produced it? Where did the meanings

associated with it originate? Navigating the internet today is to live as an ironist, sifting through layers

of meanings which shift our day-to-day realities and which themselves shift day-to-day.[31] This

deepening of the virtual in our everyday lives, for Baudrillard, represents a further detachment from

what is real and *actual*. The scholar Marie-Laure Ryan summarizes Baudrillard's virtualization process

as follows:

> By the same logic that denies a place for both the world and its doubles, there is
>
> no place in the mind for both life and the lifelikeness of transparent media.
>
> Our fascination with the latter turns us into 'virtual beings' through a
>
> reasoning that skips several intermediary steps in one powerful leap: (1) VR
>
> technology (and modern media in general) aims towards transparency; (2)
>
> transparency allows immersion; (3) by a metonymic transfer, immersion in a
>
> virtual world leads to a virtualization of the experiencer. One must assume that
>
> this virtualization involves a loss of humanity, as we offer ourselves as data and
>
> as servants to the machine.[32]

This may sound familiar. There is an increasing awareness of what appears to be our servitude to the

hegemony that is Amazon, Google, and the capitalist system as a whole. Is our similarly increasing

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[31] Richard Rorty, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 73-95.

[32] Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, 31.

dependence on digital media working in tandem with this? Perhaps, but it seems to place the blame in the wrong place. *Dasein*, in our modified definition, is interconnected with everything else, including the abstraction as well as the concrete object. Ryan offers a critique of Baudrillard's pessimism:

> We live in simulacra because we live in our own mental models of reality. What I call 'the world' is my perception and image of it. Therefore, what is real for me is the product of my copy-making, virtual-producing, meaning-making capability. The copies that make up my world cannot be perfect duplications, but this does not make them necessarily false, deceptive, or deprived of referent. In this interpretation, the absolutely real has not disappeared; it is, rather, as Slavoj Žižek defines it, 'a surplus, a hard kernel which resists any process of modeling, simulation, or metaphorization'.[33] [34]

This is the point. We always have lived in the virtual alongside the actual, and the real, and the concrete. It is integrated into the world of *Dasein*, and therefore participates in the meaning-forming interactions among all things. Philosopher Pierre Lévy, in a counterpoint to Baudrillard, claims that "the virtual, strictly defined, has little relationship to that which is false, illusory, or imaginary... On the contrary, it is a fecund and powerful mode of being that expands the process of creation, opens up the future, injects a core of meaning beneath the platitude of immediate physical presence."[35] Essentially, the virtual as Lévy defines it provides the grounding for Bachelard's poetic imagination. According to

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[33] Zizek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, 44.

[34] Ryan, 34-35.

[35] Lévy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age*, 16.

Bachelard, the poetic imagination is not idle daydreaming, but an active force in the world of Being. "By the swiftness of its actions, the imagination separates us from the past as well as from reality; it faces the future. To the *function of reality*... should be added a *function of unreality*."[36] As Ryan writes, we engage with the virtual to in turn engage with the real.

It is important to note that virtuality does not necessarily refer to digital media. Virtuality being possibility, openness, a platform for meaning-making, it naturally exists anywhere there are people. It exists in physical spaces as much as digital spaces. Ruins, whether war-torn buildings, abandoned homes, or weathered towns, are prime examples of how physical spaces harbor virtuality. You may relate to the common fascination people have with ruins, the end-of-the-world, photographs from war-torn countries, and the like. There are books, movies, television shows, poems, paintings, video games, and more which depict the collapse of civilization, mass deaths, and the consequences of such events. Take *The Walking Dead*, originally a graphic novel then adapted to an award-winning TV show, builds its story on the premise that people suddenly develop the 'ability' to transform into zombie-like creatures upon death unless they are brain-dead. This inevitably leads to the collapse of civilization, in which millions upon millions of people die, and anyone alive must fight to survive against the odds. This story, also adapted into a video game[37], became immensely popular.

Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle note in the introduction to their book *Ruins of Modernity* that ruins "are images that denote raw reality, yet the way we see them is not raw but framed by a long tradition of ruin gazing. What we see is new, and we might see it in a new way—but not for long. Soon

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[36] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 18.
[37] Telltale Games, *The Walking Dead*, 2012.

our gaze at the rubble piling up before our eyes is clouded by the iconic wreckage of ages."[38] The

spaces, and representations of those spaces, which contain our lack are more than the physical spaces

they initially appear to be. A city destroyed by war is more than just the collapsed walls, the smoldering

rubble, or the broken furniture littering the streets. The space itself tells a story and contains meanings,

histories, memories, and emotions layered within it. This should sound familiar from the discussions

of Bachelard. Inhabited spaces are more than the physical space itself.

Dialogism

Thus far we have seen how Being-in-the-world and the spaces/objects a Being (*Dasein*)

interacts with serve as a platform on which meaning can arise. This picture, however, is not yet

complete. Virtuality and the poetic imagination, the former providing the space and the latter

subjectivity in relation to that space, need a process to explain their interaction. This process is

dialogism.[39] In our sense, dialogism explains the process of dialogue between not just human

subjectivities, but the dialogue between people and objects and their environment as well.[40] As Bakhtin

writes, "Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born

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[38] Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, *Ruins of Modernity*, 1.

[39] A term used and developed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), the Russian literally being диалогизм (dialogizm).

[40] Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) is a relatively recent work on the reconceptualization of the subject and the decentering of Humanism: "Thus, the becoming-animal axis of transformation entails the displacement of anthropocentrism and the recognition of trans species solidarity on the basis of our being environmentally based, that is to say embodied, embedded and in symbiosis with other species" (67). In this case, the decentering is made to emphasize the human place among other species of living beings, but we move further to include non-living beings as well.

between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction."[41] This form of dialogue does not simply follow the patterns of normal communication, but is built upon the *acts* of *individual* voices coming together in a mutually live, evolving, exchange. As people exist in an ever-changing state of Being, so does the world around them, and that is how objects and the environment also participate in this dialogue. "According to the young Bakhtin, every action of every person is conditioned by the singularity of each in time and place... When one person faces another, his experience is conditioned by his 'outsideness.' Even in the physical sense, one always sees something in the other that one does not see in oneself."[42] Everyone and everything is embedded within time and space – Being-in-the-world – and therefore connected in their situatedness.

This goes against how subjectivity and ethical interactions are traditionally understood in Western philosophy and other theoretical disciplines (generally referred to as 'theoretisms' and its practitioners as 'theoretists' by Bakhtin), which tend to abstract general principles and rules from real experience and organize reality according to a theoretical system. This leads to a 'monologized' view of the world, where people and events are stripped of their unique, autonomous, Being-ness, and reduced to static, 'finalized,' images of reality. It is important that we acknowledge the unfinalized nature of the world, in its ever-changing historical and spatial nature. This way we might behave more ethically to one another, and to the point of this thesis, understand how the subjective experience of Being-in-the-

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[41] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 110. For further reading on the idea of truth existing as a process of dialogue and consistent self-reevaluation, see Richard Rorty's chapter "Private Irony and Liberal Hope" in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989).

[42] Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*, 53.

world is dynamic and influenced by all the interactions one engages in, including with one's

environment and art.

How then does dialogism inform the relationship between virtuality and the poetic

imagination? Virtuality exists alongside the real; it fills a space, it is the fabric by which *Dasein*'s world

is molded. The poetic imagination is *trans-subjective*[43]; the virtual landscape through which one sees,

the meanings and associations, images and imaginings, which are born and exist for one person can

affect and interact with another. The inhabited, intimate space becomes an interlocutor for someone

through time, bearing virtuality, imaginations, and individuality. These are dialogic relationships.

Now that we have the poetic imagination, virtuality, and dialogism, we can see how the virtual

field enables us to understand our original question. The phenomenon of experiencing multiple spaces

simultaneously when playing a narrative video game, facing ruins, or simply sitting in your childhood

bedroom, is the virtual field at work. Returning to the example of ruins, we can outline the system as

follows: A ruin, such as a city block blasted by bombs, exists both in the present as it currently is, but

also represents the past as it once was. A person, whether or not they know what the city block was like

prior to the bombing, infuses the space with their imagination as they think of how the space used to

be and all the possibilities it contains. This process utilizes all three building blocks of the virtual field:

the poetic imagination, as meanings are generated by the person engaging with the space and thus

infusing the space with those meanings on top of the meanings associated with the space as it currently

is; virtuality, as the space exists as a space of possibility, not fully realized but indefinitely existing as a

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[43] Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 3.

space of what-ifs; and dialogic, since this process of meaning-making and possibility depends on the

engagement of the person with the space of ruin.

We can now take what we understand about the virtual field and return to *The Last of Us*,

once again examining how we experience its text-world alongside our own.

CHAPTER THREE: *The Last of Us* & the Virtual Field

The ways in which *The Last of Us* can be understood through the model of the virtual field should be fairly clear by now. The model's three main components – poetic imagination, virtuality, and dialogism – all are found within the game, among its own inhabitants and in the experience of actualization. To reiterate, the purpose of applying this model to the game is to illustrate how it helps us understand the experience of Being-in-the-world alongside virtual-being, or in other words, the experience of multiple spaces simultaneously.

Recalling the previous section on virtual-being, we realized how *The Last of Us* enacts the same experience one has when facing a space of ruin; within the text-world, the characters and player live among what once was simultaneously with what is. The environment itself contains a platform for meaning-making that refers to this relationship of the past and present existing together, harboring images that spark the imagination with associations and connotations in the mind of the player/character. We discussed ruins as an example for how virtuality and the poetic imagination operates through the physical world. A space of ruin is a virtual space, sparking the poetic imagination to see beyond its physical contours. The environment of *The Last of Us* represents a ruined landscape, which directly evokes this experience, but the reality is any physical space has the potential to do the same. This is the work of the poetic imagination. Its trans-subjectivity, meaning-making, sparks of creation render the world a canvas, a virtual space of possibility.

In light of this, we can see how *The Last of Us* exists as a virtual space. It contains within itself potential energy, as does the space of ruin, for the player to spark into something new. The narrative design utilizing environmental storytelling and emergent narrative not only enhances the cohesion of the text-world, enabling the player to enter a state of virtual-being, but creates moments where the player can exist in the text-world as they do the actual-world, where the plot disappears and the distinction between possible-world and actual-world collapses.

Finally, there is the dialogic relationship we have with the game. The player, in virtual-being, relates to the text-world as they would the actual-world. The characters, despite their programmed nature, on the second, third, or whatever playthrough the player may be on, can still act spontaneously and uniquely in a way that the player would not expect. From random comments made while stumbling into some previously unknown spot or after standing still for several minutes, or performing the same action they had made on the previous playthroughs but this time something *felt* different about it, the characters inhabit the world of the player in a way that makes them real and consequential. The relationship between player and character becomes dialogic. The spaces of the game also naturally follow into this relationship.

The Last of Us was originally chosen as an example of an object through which we experience the virtual field, but we could also choose any text, or space for that matter, to do the same. However, we have seen how narrative video games are unique in the experiences they facilitate, and are worth exploring further. The last decade has seen a rise in the quality and popularity of narrative games, and developers are eager to take advantage of new technologies to produce increasingly compelling games.

The Last of Us was released in 2013, with its sequel in 2020, and the difference in not only technical

quality but the level of narrative experimentation for the medium was quite noticeable.

As a final note, let us briefly look at how the virtual field operates with a poem, A.R. Ammons'

"Admission."[44] Read and let yourself experience the world it creates:

The wind high along the headland,

mosquitoes keep low: it's

good to be out:

schools of occurring whitecaps

come into the bay,

leap, and dive:

gulls stroll

long strides down the shore wind:

every tree shudders utterance:

motions–sun, water, wind, light–

intersect, merge: here possibly

from the crest of the right moment

one might break away from the final room.

True to Ammons' usual theme of nature, this poem creates a drama out of the natural life of a

coastline. The wind, insects, birds, trees, light, water, all interact with each other in this scene. You may

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[44] A.R. Ammons, "Admission." Poetry Magazine.

feel like you are walking along this coastline, with every line following the movement of your eye as you take in everything happening around you. It feels meditative, calm, almost spiritual. Particularly when you arrive at the last few lines, you are transported away from the coastline into a room. This room which, "one might break away from." Multiple spaces are intersecting here. The coastline, the room, the coastline – and Earth? – as a room, and the room that you are in now. The virtual field binds these spaces together. The poem itself is a site for meaning creation, which is what the poetic imagination latches on to; it generates meaning out of the intersections of these spaces. This possibility for meaning is what makes the poem virtual as a possible-world, whereupon engagement with it one is in a state of virtual-being, actualizing the poem. And of course, where there is subjectivity there are ethical questions, ethical relationships, and dialogism helps us to understand these interactions. The poem itself cannot be finalized. Every new reader is an encounter with the poem as a possible-world again; no assigned meaning is the final interpretation.

The same should be said of people. We all exist in the space of the physical world, but the spaces of the actual-world and all the possible-worlds are much broader. This is where our imaginations, futures, and memories all reside. As long as there are people alive, these spaces will extend infinitely. This is the importance of the virtual field. We are always existing in these overlapping and evolving spaces, so how can a person be assigned a meaning, an encapsulating interpretation? People may be sites of meaning creation, but the act of creation has no end. We are always evolving together, and if we recognize the virtual field as essential to our shared Being-in-the-world, we might be able to break away from the final room.

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